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DAN DIRK, King of No Man's Land;

OR,

Lightning George's Last Card.

The Frisco Detective's Block Game.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "ALWAYS ON HAND," "TIGER DICK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

PAINTING THE TOWN RED.

"Ef you'll b'lieve me, gents, they're 'way up in G,—
A No. 1, from the ground up."

And Tony Dobson, the stage-driver, clinched his dictum by setting down his glass with a positive ring.

"The young 'un's a hummer, I go my pile," ventured one of the gaping crowd.

Tony turned his eyes upon the speaker, and responded with impressive deliberation.

"You're safe, pard, fur a million!"

"But, what do they look like?" urged a prying spirit.

"Like?" repeated the stage-driver, with a touch of that lofty scorn with which a true Westerner considers it his first duty to "set down" on anything like "freshness,"—"like angels and ministers o' grace!"

But this "bluff" did not "stand off" him of the inquiring mind.

"Do they wear them vails down all the while?" he persisted.

"You bet they do! Who has a better right?"

"But, what fur?"

"To keep the sun off 'em, greeny!"

But the "greeny" proved that Jack was as good as his master, by spreading a snare for the stage-driver's impatience.

"Then you say you never see them tony pilgrims o' yourn lift their vails—nary time?"

"That's jest what I said. Don't you b'lieve it?"

"Oh, I b'lieve it fast enough, ef you say so. But, in that case, how do you happen to know what they look like?"

At that the crowd began to grin.

"But, with an indifferent wave of the hand, the stage-driver rose superior to any such dilemma.

"Gents, I've hyeard her voice; I've seen her hand outside her glove; I've watched her walk an' ther turn of her head. An' them things—chin-music, shape, motions,—they all goes together—you hyear me!"

"Oh, I'm willin' to 'low as she's harnsome. I was only tacklin' your say-so."

Further conversation was cut short by the rapid thud of a horse's hoofs, the animal being pulled up before the door of the saloon, the rider swinging languidly out of the saddle, and fairly staggering into the room.

"A wounded man!" shouted the first to sight him. "Hyar's fun, boys."

Every eye turned upon the new-comer, with an interest he would not have excited, but for the promise in his manner of the spicy details of some life-and-death encounter.

His face, streaked with dirt and perspiration, was white with the pallor of a man who had just come from looking death in the eye. His frame trembled and tottered with the weakness of fear, even more than of exhaustion.

Outside, the reeking hide, heaving flanks, low-hanging head, and labored breathing of his horse, were evidence that the master probably owed his present safety to the fleetness of this faithful servant.

"It's Aleck Fogleman!" cried one, who recognized him. "What's the row, ole man? What have you been doin' to yer-self?"

"It's the King!" panted Fogleman, steady-ing himself with a hand on the table, and standing in the attitude of a thoroughly-blown man, while his eyes rolled heavily around over the crowd that gathered about him.

"Dan Dirk!"

Aleck nodded, and gasped out:

"Him an' his crowd."

"Did they pull you up, pardner? By Jingol you've got a gall, to say 'Good-day' when the King o' No Man's Land calls 'Halt!'"

"It wa'n't that. It's Murderer's Row. They're paintin' the town red."

"Hyar, pardner!—jest you drop into this hyar seat. Take the thing easy. You'll come out all right—that is to say, ef you hain't got no holes in ye," and Aleck was given a chair.

"No. I'm all right. It was a close call; but they didn't none of 'em pink me. I was up to Murderer's Row, all quiet an' serene, passin' the time at draw with Billy Wiggins, when up comes Dan Dirk an' his gang, whoopin' an' yellin' an' cavortin' around; an' then Tophet broke loose generally."

"I know Dan Dirk of old; an' I don't know much good of him. What's more, one o' his gang's got a grudge ag'in' me; an' I knowed as he wouldn't want no better

time'n that fur to wipe out old scores, ef he ketched me layin' around loose to his hand.

"I stood my show to best him, o' course; but, thar'd be mighty leetle satisfaction in that, after his backers had made coyote-bait o' my carcage. So I 'lowed I'd light out without givin' him no trouble, ef I got the chance.

"The trick was to git my boss. I wouldn't be nowhar without that. But it was standin' in front o' the shebang; an' Tom Curtin would spot it as fur as his eyes could reach, an' know I was inside, waiting fur him to wipe up the ground with me—ef he could spell *able*! I won the critter from him at poker; an' it r'iled him so, he swore he'd shoot me on sight."

"Waal, I knowed I could never git out o' the front door, an' away alive, ef Tom Curtin was in the crowd comin' down the street; so I peeps out o' the winder; an' thar he was, loomin' up as big as a meetin'-house.

"Then I says to myself, says I: Aleck Fogleman, you've got more to pray fur than time fur prayer! But I was bound fur to try my luck, before I traded my life fur Tom Curtin's; so I says to Billy Wiggins:

"'Billy, you go outside; and when Tom jumps in hyar, as he's bound to, the minute he sees that animile, you unhitch the beast, an' fetch him around the corner o' the house; an' thar's a round twenty dollars fur your trouble.'

"'An' my resk,' says Billy 'I'll probably git shot fur interferin'!

"'All right,' says I. 'Ef your fur goin' back on an ole pard, I'll have to play it all alone.'

"'What do ye take me fur?' says he. 'Put yer money in yer pocket—that's all I ask o' you. Blast yer eyes—do you 'low as you have to bribe me to do ye a good turn? Maybe I'll want you to do as much fur me, one o' these days. Then, blank my two eyes into one, ef I don't squar' up this hyar insult by offerin' ye money down!'

"Gents," commented the narrator, breaking off in his story, "that's what I call a white man!"

The crowd indicated its concurrence; and resumed:

"Waal, I skipped out o' the door, an' stood with my nose around the corner, listenin'.

"'Whoop! yells Curtin,—I'd know his bazoo ef a dozen calliopes was blowin' off all together. Then the hull gang pulls up, an' climbs fur the saloon door.

"I hyeared 'em bang the thing open, then the tramp-tramp of 'em in the room, like a drove o' buffaler. The next minute I see Billy comin' round the corner o' the house with my boss.

"Boys, I've seen a heap o' purty women in my time; but I never see one what could hold a candle to Billy Wiggins's ugly mug jest about that time o' day!

"The way I climbed fur that hoss wa'n't slow—I will say that.

"Then I hyeared a yell, a roar, a beller—call it what you will. You've most o' ye hyeared a mad gang cut itself loose, I reckon; but I'll lay my pile you never hyeared nothin' to beat that. It sounded *loud to me*! Next come a fusillade, right through the winder, glass an' all.

"After that— But say!—do you remember when the Gentleman from Pike rode down the canyon ahead of a cloud-burst? Waal, I reckon I'd about as leave have a thirty-foot wall o' water at my heels, as to take the ride I've jest had before Tom Curtin an' his backers. But, hyar I be, as sound as a dollar, with the hope o' better luck the next time I chance to run acrost him."

The speaker seemed disposed to take the peril that hung over him philosophically; but, Tony Dobson looked grave.

"What's a-b'ilin' in your stomach, Tony?" asked a friend, banteringly. "Don't like the idea o' facing the King on the rampage, eh? But he don't owe you no grudge, ole man. You're as safe as a church, wherever you go. Would he be fur killin' the goose that fetches him his golden eggs? Brace up, Tony! You're solid with road-agents, like a policeman with thieves."

The stage-driver disdained to vindicate his courage. It was a friend who answered for him.

"Tony's all right, King or no King. It's the women folks he's thinkin' about. Murderer's Row would be a bad place to take 'em, even in meetin'-time, ef them ornery galoots ever had any meetin's; but with Dan Dirk on the war-path, it's a *blame* bad place to take 'em."

"They'll have to stop over hyer." Fiddler's Bend ain't no paradise; but it's a sweet-smellin' place alongside o' the Row, any day."

There was a general assent to this proposition.

"I reckon," said Tony, hesitatingly, as if he did not feel very sure of his ground, "I might speak to the ladies."

"Nothin' easier," said the landlord, in nowise loth to have a couple of paying customers over night. "I'll call the ole woman; an' she'll fix ye up in as good shape as ye want."

And with this preliminary, Tony went on his mission.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS PILGRIMS.

BARE floor, bare walls, unceiled joists over head, furniture as destitute of upholstering as of decoration of any kind, comfort being entirely sacrificed to cheapness and durability—such was the room in which the stage-driver found two ladies, every line of whose persons bore the unmistakable stamp of luxurious nurture.

The elder lay on a rude wooden settle, softened only by a folded shawl, with another rolled into a pillow for her head.

The younger stood so close beside her as to rest one hand lightly on her shoulder.

Both women were draped from head to foot in the somber garb of grief, their faces hidden by heavy crape vails.

"Will you please to be seated?" invited the younger, as Tony entered.

"You will excuse me, miss—an' you, ma'am!" he stammered, slatting his thigh with his hat, as he bowed to the ladies in turn. "I wouldn't be fur intrudin' on ye like this hyar, but fur havin' a word to say what I 'lowed it might be only your just due for to hyear."

"Oh, don't consider it an intrusion at all. We are glad to see you, and thank you very much for the thoughtful attention you have shown us from the first."

Tony lifted his eyes to the speaker's face, with a look of such honest appreciation that, with a quick, impulsive movement, the girl threw back her veil, beaming upon him a perfectly dazzling smile of unaffected good-feeling.

At this the mother uttered a low murmur of admonition. But the girl, returning her hand to her shoulder, bent upon her a look of reassurance, as if she guaranteed the trustworthiness of the man before them.

"You have a kind heart, miss," said the stage-driver, bowing in acknowledgment with profound respect. "An' ef you'll allow me to make the offer, ef you ever want a backer what'll cost you nothin', an' be glad o' the job, apply to yours truly, Tony Dobson—no cards, no cake!"

The girl laughed with undisguised amusement at what he said and his way of saying it.

"Now, after your pretty speech, I am going to insist on your sitting down. I had no idea that you men of the prairies were such carpet knights, as well as such redoubtable fellows in the field. Let me take your hat."

She was very pale; and the slight shade under her eyes, seeming to deepen and darken them, gave a pathetic, almost pleading cast to her smile of invitation.

"It is about the next place on the line, miss. I'm ashamed to have to tell you, as shouldn't hyear sich things, what an onery lot we've got out hyar. It's a rough country, an' no mistake."

"The next place?"

"A place as deserves its handle—Murderer's Row."

"Oh! Could anything be more horrible!"

"The name ain't half so bad as the doin's. Them's bad enough any time. Jest now they're worse, an' more of it."

"What *can* you mean?"

"Thar's a chap, up thar at the Row, paintin' the town red, by last accounts. They was brung in by a party what they run out o' the place. He got off with a hull skin, an'

has turned up hyar all O. K., but by no fault o' Dan Dirk an' his gang."

"And who is Dan Dirk, may I ask?"

"The King o' No Man's Land."

"Is he a rancher?"

"Waal, not much to speak of—unless he corrals somebody else's stock. He's almost anythin' he kin turn his hand to, I reckon—a road-agent as often as any thing else; a gambler; a fighter always. Maybe he does a stroke of honest work now an' ag'in, jest to keep his hand in, ag'in' his bein' jugged some time, an' havin' to turn an honest penny fur the authorities. But I low as he'll go the way of all my bold buccaneers, sooner or later, before he'll come to peggin' shoes fur the State."

"An' so, miss, I was 'lowin' as you might better stop over whar you be tell things is quiet ag'in."

"Oh! but you are not going to stop the coach, are you?"

"Stop the coach? Not while Tony Dobson holds the ribbons!"

"Then we will accompany you, if you please. We have—an appointment—that must be kept."

There were very curious breaks in the girl's voice as she said that.

She hurried on, as if to get away from something distressing.

"I cannot believe that even the ruffians you describe will be utterly insensible to the defenselessness of two lone women. I will trust to the magnanimity of this King, as you call him."

The conversation was cut short by a murmur from the mother, and the sound of her rising from the settle.

"Vera," she said, "I cannot have you exposed—"

But with a low cry the girl ran to her, cast herself on her knees at her feet, threw her arms about her, and gently forced her back into a reclining posture, protesting:

"Mamma! Mamma!"

"But this unspeakable peril, for me! Let me go back—"

"Hush! hush!" breathed the girl, stopping her mother's lips by pressing her own upon them, regardless of the intervening vails. "There is no peril but one!"

Then, before anything further could be said, she turned to Tony with the appeal:

"Excuse me! Will you kindly leave me with my mother now? But, before all else, do not go from here without us. We thank you again for your care; but, however ill-advised it may seem to you, we *must* go on, and without delay."

Tony bowed himself out with an enhanced admiration of her.

A grave crowd watched their departure from Fiddler's Bend. Not a man in it but felt the impulse to make a hero of himself, by going to Murderer's Row, and throwing his life away in their defense. But no one had the nerve to brave the King of No Man's Land in one of his wild moods.

Out of all these good wishes, they had only the stage-driver's parting assurance:

"Don't you furgit it, miss—nor you, ma'am—as you've got one solid friend in this hyar world—no great shakes, maybe, but what ye kin tie to—ef you never have another."

Then he drove to Murderer's Row, where, almost before he had warning, the stage was besieged by a mob of crazy-drunk ruffians.

"Hold on, boys!" expostulated the stage-driver. "Thar ain't nobody in thar what you're wantin'. Thar's only two ladies."

"Ladies? Whoop! Oh, scrape me off! Hyar's ladies! Show up, ladies!"

And to their eager demand Vera Stanard responded, by presenting herself boldly on the step of the coach.

To her profound astonishment, she saw the stage-driver, on whose support she had confidently counted, leap from his place and incontinently desert her, running at the top of his speed, pursued and fired at by a part of the drunken mob.

CHAPTER III.

THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND.

MR. STANARD stood on the step of the coach with her form drawn proudly erect, though every nerve in her body quivered like a harp-string.

The yells of the mob were suddenly hushed, and the outlaws stared at her in wondering curiosity.

She took advantage of the momentary silence, to speak to them.

"Gentlemen," she said, "when I tell you that the only other occupant of the coach is my mother, who is so ill that she cannot well bear noise and excitement, I do not believe that you will be so wanting in consideration as to add needlessly to her distress by a continuance of this shouting. Alone and unprotected as we are, we have traveled hundreds of miles through a country where the only law was that law of chivalrous protection which every man owes to all women; and you surely cannot be willing that your town should be the first in which we have received anything but the utmost courtesy and kindness. We have come among you to stay, if you will give us shelter, and we will repay with gratitude that neighborly good-will which cannot be requited with money. I hope that, when you come to know us better, you will gladly recall that your reception was a friendly one."

Sober men would have been disarmed by this speech. Even that drunken rout of outlaws might have been checked, but for one ruffian callous to every generous emotion.

With a hiccough, and in drunken sportiveness, rather than in malice, he broke the silence that followed this unlooked-for appeal, with:

"I say, my beauty, sing us that thar to another tune—do."

This caused a laugh, than which nothing will so quickly and effectually shatter a spell that derives its power from our higher sentiments.

"How do *we* know she's a beauty?" demanded another. "Shake that thar head-riggin', an' le's see what ye look like, anyhow."

"That's what we want to see."

Mrs. Stanard at that moment pressed forward to throw her arms about her daughter. She had risen from her seat and sought to draw her daughter back into the coach.

With the same instinct of protection, the girl threw out her hands, sideways and backward, to obstruct her mother's passage.

"My darling!" murmured the agonized mother.

"Hush! hush!" admonished the daughter, still clinging desperately to her self-possession.

It was no time to lose one's head in terror. Some chance to stem this tide might present itself. She must keep on the alert to seize it.

But the wolfish interest of the ruffians now pressing around the coach door drove everything but stony horror from her mind; and with a gasping cry of dread, she shrunk backward, to escape the clutch of a hand on her dress.

This involuntary movement enabled the mother to drag her in, and pass her.

Like a tigress in defense of her young, the mother confronted the outlaw.

"Monster!" she cried, throwing up her vail, and staring into his eyes with a look of undaunted directness such as he had never before met.

He had managed to seize the skirt of Vera's dress, but the intensity of passion, the noble aspect, the high courage, of the face thrust forward to within a foot of his, daunted his meaner nature, and in the momentary recoil of an ignoble spirit before a grand one, he involuntarily relaxed his grasp, so as to let the garment slip through his fingers.

Stumbling backward over the sill of the coach door, Vera fell, half upon the floor of the vehicle, half upon the seat.

Her mother did not stop, but, passing through the door, alighted in the very midst of her persecutors.

"Be you men or devils," she cried, facing them in the utter abandon of desperation. "Is there no one within the sound of my voice with the common instincts of humanity? Has crime and the accursed liquor you drink so deadened you to pain, that the cry of a mother cannot pierce your deaf ears to your stony hearts?"

But she was not left to confront them alone.

Recovering her balance, Vera sprung out

of the coach, and threw her arms about her mother.

"Oh, gentlemen!" she cried, "you do not realize what you are doing. My dear mother is ill. She has suffered all that she can bear, already. This excitement will kill her. Have you no mercy? Have you no pity? I beg of you—"

"Not for me!" interrupted the mother, now thoroughly roused. "You monsters! Dare you—the most abandoned of you—lay a hand on this innocent child? Heaven cannot endure it! God, in His wrath, will strike you dead!"

"I'll risk that thar," returned the burly ruffian. "B'ar witness all!—I got my hand on her first! She's mine to care for an' protect."

And he seized the girl by the arm, with a clutch that would have made her wince with pain, if the terror of the moment had left her any feeling.

As it was, she shrieked and hid her face in her mother's bosom, in an agony of fear.

The mother was goaded out of all the gentleness and reserve of her sex and social training.

Striking the ruffian in the face, she sought to break his hold.

Thrusting her rudely back, he tore her child from her, whirling her around so as to interpose his bulky body between the two.

"Men! men! oh, God!" was the helpless appeal of the agonized mother.

She could not speak to the ruffianly assailant. Only sobs and tears were her mute appeal.

They would have failed; but at this moment a cry of alarm and warning rose in the crowd.

Vera, half dead with terror, only saw the crowd scatter, without understanding why; heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs, coming she knew not whence, to be drawn up abruptly so near that the dirt was showered over her; saw some one leap from the saddle, and striking straight out from the shoulder, knock her captor down like a log, then seize her about the waist, and prevent her from being dragged down in his fall.

A strong arm sustained her, as, for the first time in her life, she came so near fainting that she would have sunk to the ground but for its support.

The next instant her savior had lifted her mother, and placed the two in each other's arms.

"My dear madam," he said, in a deep, rich, base voice, strong in its unruffled calm, "have no further fears. You are safe henceforth from every annoyance. I am deeply pained at what you have suffered."

"Oh, sir!" sobbed the mother, "I shall bless you to my dying day!"

Vera seized his hand, and before he guessed what she was about to do, pressed her lips to it.

In this act she threw back her vail; and as she lifted her face, he for the first time saw it.

Looking into each other's eyes, one saw the flower of womanhood in its early bloom; the other, the pride of vigorous manhood.

The man had the physique of a sculptor's model—deep chest, broad shoulders, the poise and flowing movements of lithe strength. His face was finer than any she had seen, though the western wilds breed men like Greek gods. Even in that moment, she noticed, with a woman's quick grasp of details, the depth and clearness and calm strength of his dark eyes, the fineness of his hair and beard, the chiseled purity of his features.

But another claimed a share of her attention. Tony Dobson stood at hand, with a look of quiet satisfaction and expectancy on his face.

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, realizing the situation at a glance, "you have brought this help!"

And she extended her hand to him in gratitude.

Tony bowed over it, with a sweep of his hat.

"You thought I'd run away from you!" he declared, gathering this from her look of surprise.

"I shall have to beg your pardon every time I see you," said the girl, without attempted denial. "But, just now, my mother—"

"Allow me, madam!" interposed her res—

cuer, and thrusting his arm through that of Mrs. Stanard, he came to the aid of her trembling limbs, that now, with the reaction from her recent excitement, were on the point of refusing their further support.

"The other side!" he said to Tony, as the woman swayed and let her head sag against his shoulder, while her eyelids drooped with faintness.

Tony sprung to share the burden, while Vera appealed to her mother tremulously:

"Mamma! mamma! bear up! It is all over now. *Dear mamma!*"

They half carried the swooning woman into the house, which bore the suggestive name of the Jack Pot.

When the men had placed her in repose, Vera followed them to the door, saying to her rescuer:

"Oh, sir! I cannot express the gratitude—"

"Do not try, if you would repay me most acceptably."

"I will not. But we shall feel the more. And I may at least express the hope that you have not brought trouble and danger upon yourself, by antagonizing the leader of those terrible men. I have heard of his ruthlessness and power. Do not let solicitude for us bring you into further conflict with him. He did not injure me, beyond the fright of the moment; and I hope you will let the matter drop, if he shows a willingness to do so."

Dan Dirk bowed, to hide an odd expression lurking under his drooping eyelids, as he replied:

"I have no fear of him; nor need you have."

"But I am told that he holds such absolute sway here, that he is called the King of No Man's Land. Do not make light of what you have incurred, to quiet my fears."

"There is much in a name—especially a bad one; and stories multiply, and lose nothing in spiciness, where every one is more eager for telling effect than for accuracy. Do not believe all you hear about Dan Dirk. He is not such a terrible fellow as he is painted."

"And now, with your permission, I will leave you to the care of your mother."

"Not, I hope, till you have enabled me to tell her to whom we are indebted for this inestimable service."

"You may think of me—when you so honor me—as Joseph Stillwell."

Dan bowed himself out of the room, but turned again on the threshold, with an ir-resolute:

"If—"

Then, looking into her eyes with a diffidence of appeal which is the tribute of strength to the charm of beauty:

"And you?—if you would honor me! It is odd that we should feel so about a name. But it is a tie which, if you will consent to intrust me with it, I shall hold ever sacred."

This was making more of the matter than casual acquaintance would seem to require. But the girl had even greater cause for embarrassment in the violence she was forced to do to her truthful nature.

"My mother's name is—Hutchinson, if you please."

She flushed scarlet; and the pathetic "if you please" might have made the hearer smile, but that he was under the spell of her beauty, so that whatever she did seemed appropriate.

So they parted, she to return to her mother, he—thanking his lucky stars for the accident that had made her fix upon the burly ruffian who had assaulted her as the redoubtable Dan Dirk—to make provision against her being undeceived.

Calling about him as many of his own men of the town as he could assemble, he admonished them:

"Boys, those ladies know me as Joseph Stillwell; and Tom Curtin, yonder, they believe to be the King of No Man's Land. Go, spread this through the camp; and this also—that the man, woman, or child, who tells them any different during their stay here, *dies!* Remember! I am a rancher."

CHAPTER IV.

DEMONS OF REMORSE.

DAN DIRK—for such indeed was he who was palming himself off on an unsuspecting girl as an honest man—put himself at the

head of the sober ones of the party, and scoured the camp for the much greater number of the drunken gang.

Putting the worst of these under a guard of such as were sufficiently themselves to obey his commands, he sent them out of the camp in a body, and so restored quiet where pandemonium had so recently reigned.

Slapping Tom Curtin familiarly on the shoulder, while he grasped his hand with as much confidence and cordiality as if there had been no cause for resentment on the part of the ruffian he had robbed of his prey, he said:

"Come, Tom! no malice. The eagle comes before the hawk, you know. And if I knock you down to-day, to correct a little misapprehension, it is only to more than make it up to you to-morrow."

"That's all right, boss," answered Curtin, with no trace of feeling in the matter. "I'd 'a' had a white elephant on my hands, I reckon, ef I'd 'a' got her."

"A white elephant, for rarity—yes."

And the King of No Man's Land put his subordinate in charge of the howling crew of inebriates.

To others he gave a commission, with instructions to ride like the wind. They were to fetch certain delicacies in the shape of canned goods, into his right and title to which it might be as well for his guest, if conscientious, not to inquire; and a haunch of venison curing at his retreat, about which there could be less question, since it was a prize of his own rifle. Two bottles of wine—and the question of rightful ownership might have been pressed, this time by a party of English sportsmen, who got an authentic story of adventure to tell their friends, in exchange for certain creature comforts out of their well-stored hampers—two bottles of excellent wine completed the list.

Returning to the Jack Pot, he had collared landlord McMurrin, and was arranging to make night in that hostelry a little less hideous than the ladies would otherwise probably find it, when Vera suddenly made her appearance, with a look of eagerness on her face.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, she ejaculated, in apology for her abruptness, with a slight inclination of the head to Dan Dirk."

Without break, she continued, to the landlord:

"Has the stage gone yet? Oh, I hope not!"

"It has not, miss, though—"

"Because we wish to accompany it. May I depend upon you kindly to notify the driver? We will be ready in a moment."

"But—I beg your pardon!" interposed Dan Dirk with a start—"I understood that you intended to remain here for a time. Did not you say something to that effect?"

"That was our purpose; but, from what has happened, my mother has conceived a horror of the place. She is ill, sir."

"You need not worry about the stage," said Dan, coming to a decision. "As it does not leave till after dinner, you have ample time for your mother to reconsider her resolve. If you really wish to stay, and she will allow me to see her, I will make an effort to reassure her. I should esteem it an honor, if you would permit me to dine in your company."

"You are very kind, sir; and I will consult my mother. You will excuse me if I return to her at once."

The dinner was prepared under Dan Dirk's immediate supervision, his chief aim being to look sharp after cleanliness.

When Mrs. Stanard made her appearance in the dining-room, she was outwardly calm. She was exceedingly pale, and had a hunted look in her eyes, in addition to unspeakable sadness.

Dan Dirk was quick to offer her his arm, with a polished deference that bespoke the gentleman, by training, if not in nature.

"Madam," he said, "I am deeply sensible of the compliment you pay me, in permitting this privilege. I cannot express my regret, that I was not aware of your approach in time to spare you the shock you have sustained."

"Your courtesy goes far to mitigate it, sir. My daughter has told me of your kindly interest."

"I trust that my assurance of protection

from further annoyance of any kind, will prevail with you to return to your earlier purpose of remaining here, at least till you are somewhat recovered."

But at that suggestion the lady shuddered. "Let us not speak of it till you are refreshed," Dan hastened to interpose.

He seated her at the table, and poured a glass of wine for her at once.

Vera declined a like proffer,

"I require no stimulants," she said, with a smile. "Fresh air, and pure water, and plenty of sunshine, answered all my needs,"

"I can well believe it," answered Dan, with a glance that gave lightness and frankness to his compliment, redeeming it from the oppressive effect of studied flattery.

"If mamma has any magnanimity in her composition, it ought to be quickened by such an offering, I am sure," laughed Vera, holding up a morsel of boned chicken on her fork.

But again the mother shuddered.

"Do not speak of it! I cannot get the horror of that ruffian—Dan Dirk, do you call him?—out of my mind."

It was lucky that she kept her eyes upon her plate, while her daughter turned to soothe her; for the gentleman opposite them flushed to the temples.

Then he turned very pale; and during the rest of the sitting his changed manner filled Vera with vague wonder and uneasiness.

Dan Dirk became brilliant in conversation, but at the same time artificial, and with a flavor of sarcasm quite foreign to his previous geniality.

He carried out his purpose of trying to reassure Mrs. Stanard; but his manner, now superficial and conventional, had lost the magnetism of sincerity.

Vera felt chilled, though she could not have told why; and her own persuasions lost all urgency. She was vaguely glad that her mother persisted in her determination to go on.

"We shall have at least one grateful memory of—Murderer's Row!" she said, giving him her hand in parting.

But her manner was now that of a society belle, not the confidential cordiality which he had won and lost again.

"You leave me to profound regrets," he said, bending over her hand.

She withdrew it almost hastily, and with unmistakable coldness, turning at once to her mother.

Dan Dirk set his teeth, though not a line of his face gave outward expression to the chagrin that gnawed at his heart like a corroding poison.

In silence he watched the departure of the coach, till it was lost in the foliage of a distant belt of timber.

Then, suddenly rousing, he plucked out his revolvers, and fired them in rapid succession into the air.

His men hastily flocked about him, expectant of his commands.

"Come, boys!" he cried. "Now let's lift the lid off of Tophet again! I swore I'd make this town dance; and I will, or bury every man, woman and child in it! Fetch 'em out, an' stand 'em in a line!"

"Whoop!" yelled his men, well pleased at his change of mood.

And scattering in every direction, they herded the citizens of the place and drove them toward the center, like a round-up of cattle.

Never was assembled a more motley crew. "Stand 'em in a row!" commanded Dan Dirk, with the black scowl of a pirate. "No skulking! We're going to have a competitive jig."

They formed a circle about the place, and while the reveling outlaws fired at their feet, were forced to dance with heels to which jollity lent no spring.

Then, maddened by some qualm of conscience, Dan Dirk leaped into the saddle, and followed by the men whom he did not stop to command, dashed out of the camp.

He outstripped those who sought to accompany him; and no one knew the horrors of that night of riding in futile flight from the demons of remorse that were within, though to his distraught mind they at times seemed to hover about him in the air.

No one heard the despairing words:

"And this is the sum of my life, with its

early promise, its youthful aspirations! Who could have believed that I would make such shipwreck? An outlaw, a robber! I might say—Thank God, not yet a murderer!—but to what end? Even that will come in time. How have I escaped it till now? It is my fortune, not the legitimate fruit of my life. And even this is an evasion. I am the chief of an outlaw band.

"But some little shred of humanity remains!" he pleaded with his anguish-wrung conscience. "I would not break the heart I love, even if it were given to me to do so! I was beside myself. What could I have been dreaming of when I thought to preserve the illusion? In the end she would know me for myself, and turn from me shuddering! But if it were possible to get her away, and never let her know!—if it were my fortune to win her, could I bind her to me blindly? That were worse than the murder I have striven to keep my hands clean of! A thing of purity to so vile a wretch!"

In this struggle the devil won, by the old argument of despair.

"This is folly! What I want is action. I have gone too far to retreat; but I can press forward till I kill the little conscience left in me. I wonder if any of the wretches whose weapons are at my command ever have moments like this? Tush!"

In the gray of the morning he rode—his horse jaded, himself a man of stone—into the mountain retreat where his band harbored.

It was a forest solitude. Nothing but the rudest life was possible in such surroundings. To a man for whom the world held any hope, it would have been unendurable.

Here, with only the gratification of the sense of power, he lived, wondering every day of his life why he continued so worthless a pursuit.

But now his men saw, by the fire in his eye, that he was ready for action.

"I will slay this madness, at least!" he said to himself. "I will make my soul so black that her white image will flee the accused place!"

And that night he planned a stage-robbery.

On the following day his project was carried into execution; the coach was "pulled up," and its passengers ordered to come forth.

There was a cattle-man with a heavy belt of money strapped about his waist. There was a gambler with the proceeds of a lucky run at cards on his person. A prospective settler was inspecting the country, with sufficient funds in his possession to see him through a pretty extended tour. A woman, deeply draped in mourning weeds, in silence hugged the grief of her seeming recent widowhood, behind the seclusion of her veil.

The last to issue from the coach was a man who seemed more anxious to propitiate his captors than the sturdy fellows who had preceded him.

"Gentlemen," he said, presenting a revolver, "I trust that an unconditional surrender will insure me from violence at your hands."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed one of the outlaws. "Hyar's a tenderfoot with a brace o' we'pons strapped to him what he's afeared 'll go off on his hands. What'll we do with him, cap'n?"

The stranger had already picked out the chief, by the part he played, all the road-agents being equally masked; and it was to him that his weapons were tendered.

"I am glad to know that you are the head of this band, sir," he pursued, with a rather sickly, sycophantic smile. "I picked you out as the most magnanimous; and I believe you will prove that my confidence is not misplaced."

He held out a weapon in either hand; and to receive them Dan Dirk thrust his own revolver into his belt.

Perhaps he would not have done so, had not the other men been already disarmed by his deft subordinates; while the woman was of course not to be feared, and the "weakening" of this fellow inspired only contempt.

But there is nothing so uncertain as a dead-sure thing.

With a bound of unexpected agility, the stranger passed Dan, so that, as he faced

about, he had all of the outlaws in front of him, their chief intervening.

As he passed, he reversed his revolver with the dexterity of a juggler, and presented its muzzle to Dan Dirk's temple.

But this was not all. He proved that he knew how to handle himself uncommonly well, by the address with which, reaching behind Dan with his left hand, he seized the King's right wrist, so as to prevent him from drawing a weapon with his most effective hand, and also from turning after his antagonist in the most direct way—on the side which he had passed. He could not face him without turning three-quarters round, and first presenting the back of his head.

Of course, in the hands of one so skillful as this man, had proved himself to be, he would be a dead man several times over before he could offer any respectable resistance.

"Gentlemen," said his captor, now with a satirical coolness that inspired the respect and admiration of all who heard and saw him, "you all, no doubt, appreciate the magic of the drop. I need not tell you that though you can fill me with lead afterward, the life of your chief is meanwhile in my hands. No one will be likely to shoot at me who is not a traitor at heart, with a secret grudge against his captain. It remains with you to decide. Shall we arbitrate this little matter, or begin the slaughter? I have my eye on one or two more of you, whom I fancy I can make my torch-bearers to the happy hunting grounds."

CHAPTER V.

THE MAGIC OF THE DROP.

For one breathless moment not a sound or motion followed this bantering speech.

The spectators, one and all, knew that every word spoken was literally true. Dan Dirk's life hung on the caprice of the man who held him, as he had said, "by the magic of the drop."

Fully recognizing their helplessness, his followers waited for him to compass his own salvation in his own way.

In this trying moment the robber chieftain betrayed not a sign of fear. Instead, he quietly turned his head, so as to look at his captor with a smile of unqualified admiration, lost to the spectators, of course, by reason of his mask.

"Counting my life as nothing," he said, "it would be a pity to deprive the world of one of your exceptional talents. You are an uncommonly fine actor, sir, in more than one sense of the word. As it is plain that you are in position to dictate the terms of our accommodation, I respectfully await your initiative."

"I always like to deal with a gentleman, as well as a man of nerve," returned the stranger, with a brisk, business-like cheerfulness. "If your subordinates are all of your mind, I fancy we shall have no difficulty in coming to an amicable adjustment."

"My will is law with my men," answered the King of No Man's Land, with neither hesitation nor haughtiness.

"Excuse me, then, if I begin by placing you at a little further disadvantage."

And, loosening his grip—no gentle one—on Dan's wrist, he deprived him of his weapons with a celerity in keeping with his other movements.

"Now, sir, oblige me by standing at your ease."

With this permission, Dan Dirk turned and faced his captor, looking him over curiously.

He saw a man of shorter stature than his own—a young man, of certainly not more than twenty-five—very good-looking, after a reckless sort of style. His features were regular and fine. His intensely black eye had an almost startling magnetism about it. He wore his hair—of remarkable softness and gloss—rather longer than is the mode; and it was perhaps this, together with a sort of jaunty bearing, that gave him something of a rakish aspect.

He was dressed in the rough and ready attire of the border, and had proved himself sufficiently an artist to secure garments at second hand, and so avoid adding the glare of the newness to rawness in his bearing of them.

It was his manner, assumed for the occasion, that had betrayed him at once as a tenderfoot. The moment he chose to act a part

in keeping with his disguise, the illusion would have taxed a very observant eye.

"You are a bold man, as well as adroit," observed Dan Dirk, "sizing him up" almost at a glance. "May I ask to whom I have the honor of subjection?"

"With perfect freedom, sir—as I shall answer."

"Making free with the truth, you mean?"

"If you will have it so. But I thought this was a country in which no one presumed to go back of the record."

"You are correctly informed. Proceed, if you please."

"Well, then, I have the honor to be—your obedient servant, Jones Brown-Smith!"

And lifting his hat with his left hand, the stranger bowed in mock courtesy—never for a moment, however, letting his alert eyes lose sight of the road-agent chief and all his men.

"And may I further ask, Mr. Brown-Smith, why you have taken what I may with all modesty call this great risk? A man of your perceptions must know that the slightest chance might have made even your address miscarry."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders lightly.

"I did not choose to be robbed!" he answered, simply.

Then, with a short, dry laugh, he added:

"Perhaps I am something of a robber myself!"

"At any rate, you are a man after my own heart!" declared Dan Dirk, with patent sincerity. "If you will permit the liberty, I would express my regret that our life-paths have not crossed before. And it shall not be my fault, if they diverge when this affair is adjusted."

"You do me altogether too much honor!" exclaimed Mr. Brown-Smith, bowing again with mock humility, yet with no abatement of his watchfulness.

"Meanwhile," said Dan Dirk, "what are the terms of our accommodation?"

"The unconditional surrender which I proffered when fortune was against me," replied Mr. Brown-Smith, politely.

"You have that already, perforce. Further?"

"The withdrawal of your men, that we—I, my dear sir!—may be more at ease. As you have no further use for them, suppose they await you at your accustomed rendezvous?"

The King of No Man's Land flushed behind his mask. Here was an unimagined indignity. He was to be led away captive out of the very midst of his men!

But Dan Dirk was a man who wasted little time and less sentiment on the inevitable. His motto was—"When you cannot what you would, make the best of what you can!"

Bowing to the dictate of his captor, he dismissed his men with a wave of the hand.

In dumb amazement they withdrew, whether by inadvertence or design choosing the wrong way, till their master set them right.

Notwithstanding that they had selected the most direct route to the retreat, Dan arrested them.

"Not that way, if you please. The stage proceeds that way."

The men changed their direction, riding off at a spanking gallop; and when they were out of ear-shot, one of their number asked:

"Pards, do you know who that handy gent is?"

"No, do you?"

"Yes. He's Lightnin' George o' Frisco."

"An' who might Lightnin' George o' Frisco be?"

"Didn't you never hear tell o' him?"

"No."

"Waal, that's fame fur ye!"

"But, who is he? What has he done worth speakin' of?"

"In Frisco, they most gineraly—them as knows his ways—asks *what hain't he done?* He's a gentleman in the daytime, among the nobs and nobesses; he's a gilt-edge sport at night, among the b'boys. He lives a double life. One o' these fine days, I've always allowed, they'd drop to him all round. Then thar'd be music. I reckon they must have got on to him. That accounts fur his bein' out hyar. But, whatever fetches him this way, he'll muke music while he stays—you hyear me!"

Meanwhile the subject of this spirited bi-

ography had bowed with a quiet smile of appreciation, on Dan Dirk's changing the direction taken by his men.

"I am obliged to you for sparing me the embarrassment of the suggestion," he remarked.

"If you doubt my ultimate integrity," answered Dan, "please give me credit for less clumsiness than would subject you to such embarrassment."

"I protest, sir," insisted Mr. Brown-Smith, "that I have a higher opinion of you than you think. Your word would have been sufficient assurance, as I shall presently prove to you, but that I desire agreeable company to Fiddler's Bend. It is the indiscreet zeal alone, of those who must love you with jealous ardor, that I would guard against, as much—believe me, sir!—in your interest as in my own."

It was still the hand of iron in the glove of silk. The covert menaces of this man were sweeter than the fawning adulation of another.

However, he made his words good by restoring Dan's weapons to him the moment his men were out of sight. More than this, he put himself at the mercy of the man he had, so recently humiliated, by returning his own weapons to their place.

Dan Dirk lost all sense of humiliation in keen admiration of this masterful gentleman.

"Come, sir!" he cried, "what assurance have you that I will not turn the tables on you, summon my men back, and yet rob you of the treasure you have guarded with such address?"

"Ho!" laughed Mr. Brown-Smith carelessly, "if I can be so mistaken in my estimate of a man, I ought to be pulled up; the sooner, the better."

"But I have given you no pledge."

"I deemed none necessary. If you could accept and abuse a purely gratuitous advantage, you would not be the man I take you for. Somehow, I fancy it isn't the filthy lucre you are after, altogether."

"You have keen discernment, or are a lucky guesser?"

"Let it go at that. Suppose we go into the coach."

"Not till you have accepted my hand. I hope I may see more of you."

The two worthies shook hands as cordially as might honest men.

"And the rest of us are under some obligations to you, sir," observed the stockman. "It would have embarrassed me somewhat to have those fellows go through me. It has taught me a lesson. If I get as far as Fiddler's Bend without further molestation, I shall make the Express Company responsible for the funds that, but for you, would have fallen into the clutches of these irresponsible gentlemen."

Mr. Brown-Smith dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand.

"Most of the good things of life come from the self seeking of somebody. Sir, you owe me nothing, since what I did was wholly with reference to myself. At the same time, I am glad that you profited by it."

The others having made a similar acknowledgment, Mr. Brown-Smith offered to assist the lady back into the coach, she intimating her sense of indebtedness to him only by a bow and a half-audible murmur. He accounted in the most obvious way for her extreme agitation, and thought nothing further of it.

On the way to Fiddler's Bend Dan Dirk did not learn why the stranger had sought to retain his company, if indeed he was willing, as he had said, to accept his bare word as a guarantee of safety. He talked very glibly all the while, about the country and the wild life of its inhabitants—not more to Dan than to the others.

"You are very brave, madam," he observed, "to travel alone through this lawless country."

"We have to do as we must, sor," she answered, with the hoarseness of one who is a prey to grief, adding, with a plaintive break in her voice, the explanation: "My mon's dead now!"

"I don't suppose it is of common occurrence," observed Mr. Brown-Smith, turning to Dan with the careless air of one who was rattling on for the sake of something to say. "But this reminds me of a couple of ladies—

a widow and her daughter, apparently; people of ultra refinement, whom you would never dream of seeing without attendance—coming somewhere up this way, I fancy. Charming girl! Not the less interesting by reason of her deep grief!"

He had the grace to drop his voice, out of deference to the sorrowing woman near him; yet he spoke so carelessly that Dan answered, off his guard.

"Yes; they passed through Murderer's Row day before yesterday."

"Indeed? Murderer's Row! Well, that's suggestive, at any rate. Delightful country!"

And he laughed, with no apparent further thought of the ladies to whom he had referred.

As they approached Fiddler's Bend, which, of course, Dan could not well enter in his present character, Mr. Brown-Smith expressed regret at losing the company of the man whose acquaintance he had so strangely formed. So they parted, with great cordiality on both sides.

Dan made his way to his forest retreat, to be plunged into deep dejection. His men supposed it was due to chagrin at having been outwitted, and wondered why he did not seek satisfaction in retaliation.

Meanwhile the stranger kept on to Murderer's Row, where, during the short stop of the coach, he strolled into the bar of the Jack Pot, bought a handful of cigars, glanced idly about, and finally began listlessly to turn the leaves of the Register.

When buying the cigars, he had won upon the barkeeper by saying:

"Won't you join me, pardner?" in the off-hand way of a good fellow, who likes to make it pleasant for everybody about him.

So now, when he suddenly lifted his brows with:

"Two ladies! By Jove! I wonder if they are not the same I saw up the country, the other day? Coming down this way, too, now I think of it. I laid a wager on the younger one. Bet one to two that she had a pug nose, against a fellow who was carried away by her walk. Ha! ha! ha! The bet is off, though. We didn't get a chance to decide it. Hang me if she didn't keep her veil down all the while. By the way, that may be a new fashion. We have another of the same sort out there in the coach now. So they've passed through Murderer's Row. Don't things turn out queer? I may have a sight at her yet, and win my money, too!"

He spoke so carelessly that even a friend of the ladies might have been thrown off his guard. As for Pat McMurrin, he had no scruple about exposing them to the impertinence of an idle stranger.

"Sure, sor," he replied, "they wint through all shtraight; but they kim back ag'in, so they did. The ould lady's failin'; so jest beyant she had a turn, an' they had to fetch her back."

"Indeed! And they are at the hotel now?"

It was not often that Pat McMurrin had his "ranch" called a hotel by anybody but himself; and he was not insensible to the politeness of the stranger.

"Not heur, sor," he answered, "Sure, the docthor ordered the lady quiet. So I got them the best house in the camp;—a new wan, an' in good shape fur gentry loike thim."

"Well, they were lucky to find such a vacancy. By the way, I haven't asked what sort of accommodation you have for me. And my grip-sack! Hang me if I don't believe that confounded stage has gone off with it! Did I fetch it in here with me?"

And he looked about, with an affectation of anxiety that caused the landlord to drop his eyelids in a suggestive wink to a bystander, as he observed, rather dryly:

"Ye nadn't be afther worrying, sor. Sure, the stage is ferninst the doour yet. I'll fetch the grip-sack fur yez."

So Mr. Jones Brown-Smith registered all in due form, as from Santa Fe, and took up his abode at the Jack Pot.

It was no task to find out where the ladies were domiciled. Such unusual residents were the talk of the town, and the gift of a cigar, followed by a few minutes' random gossip, put him in possession of all the information he wanted.

After nightfall Mr. Brown-Smith strolled toward the house, situated on the outskirts of the camp. It was a two-story structure—that is to say, of one clear story and a garret under the roof—and so, far more commodious than any other in the camp save the Jack Pot, and the gambling and dance-houses generally.

A white muslin curtain screened the window of an apartment communicating with the chief living-room, on the first floor, upon which a passing figure was occasionally cast in silhouette by the candle-light.

As Mr. Brown-Smith drew near he heard within a murmur of voices, to distinguish one of which he listened with beating heart:

His knock was followed by a moment of breathless silence. Then a light tread approached the door, and a soft voice asked through it:

"Who is there, please?"

Putting his lips to the latch—the door could be secured on the inside by a bar of oak thrown across it—Mr. Brown-Smith said:

"Vera, it is I. You need not be afraid."

There was a glad cry, followed by the announcement, tremulous with eagerness:

"Mamma, it is George! Oh! oh!"

Hastily the bar was lifted, and the door thrown open; and on the threshold appeared such a picture of radiant loveliness as few men are privileged ever to be greeted with.

"Oh, George! we are so delighted to see you!" murmured Vera, her starry eyes making sad havoc with his quiet. "How have you managed to follow us so soon? But come to mother at once. Oh, we have need of you!"

One who had heard, without seeing her, would have supposed, from the inflections of her voice, that she had cast herself into the arms of a lover.

And one there was who, seeing as well as hearing—

But this is anticipating. Let us pause to pick up another thread of our drama.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE.

THE woman who had shared Mr. Brown-Smith's adventure with the road-agents, and afterward informed him of her recent widowhood with "a bit o' the brogue" at the tip of her tongue, accompanied him to Murderer's Row, remaining in the coach while he went to his interview with Pat McMurrin of the Jack Pot.

He would have been not a little surprised to know how observant of his movements was this unknown Irish woman, and the degree of agitation she experienced when McMurrin came for his grip-sack.

"Now comes the crisis!" she said to herself; and in her thoughts there was no trace of the brogue that had appeared in her speech on the few occasions when he had been allowed to hear it.

A slight tremor of her figure was the only outward sign of what was going on within. Her gleaming eyes were hidden by her thick veil.

When the stage went on, it bore her away with it; and the rancher, who had made good his word by shifting the responsibility of his money to the Express Company, and the gambler, who had concluded to "chance it again,"—neither guessed that their companion was less loth to leave Murderer's Row than she had been to see the last of Fiddler's Bend.

But scarcely was the stage out of sight of the camp, hidden from view by a belt of timber land, than she called to the driver:

"Will you plaze to shlop, sor?"

"Certainly, ma'am," answered Tony, complying with his usual cheerfulness.

"If I may have a wurrud wid you alone, sor, I'll take it kindly."

"With the greatest pleasure in life, ma'am."

And wonderingly Tony descended from the box.

"It's a d'ale o' trouble I'm giving you, sor," said the lady, apologetically, as she manifested her purpose of getting out of the coach, when Tony opened the door.

"Not the least bit in the world, ma'am. I'm never so happy as when sarvin' the ladies."

"Av you'll take a shtep wid me, sor."

And to Tony's utter astonishment, instead of walking either forward or back along the road, to get out of earshot of her fellow passengers, if, as it appeared, she sought a private consultation of any kind, she struck out at right angles into the timber, in the undergrowth of which she would soon be not only out of hearing, but out of sight, of any one remaining in the coach.

In that country, a mystery invariably suggests precaution.

Tony had a wild thought. Could it be that she was not a woman, but some man with sinister designs against him?

However, the sturdy stage-driver was far from being afraid of a man in a man's clothes, not to say a man—if such it should prove to be—in a woman's clothes.

So, merely taking the natural precaution to assure himself that his revolver was free in its holster, he tramped after her, depending upon his quickness of eye to detect any suspicious movement of the hands of his guide.

When they were quite screened from the coach, the lady turned, and as she did so, threw back her veil, revealing her face to the astonished gaze of the stage-driver.

To his amazement, he saw a woman of rare beauty. To his simple eye she seemed as much a lady as Vera Stanard, though with a difference which he did not clearly analyze.

She was very dark, with lips of vivid scarlet, and eyes that "burnt a hole through him," to use his own expression.

Her features were small, and what might be called piquant, rather than strictly conformable to any particular canon of beauty. But their very lawlessness gave them a sort of saucy charm all their own.

She smiled at Tony's stare of astonishment.

"Well, sor," she said, still affecting the brogue, "an' phwat do yez think o' me?"

"I think you're like all the rest of 'em," answered the stage-driver, recovering his wits, and falling in with her humor.

"A little liar, eh?" now dropping the brogue, and proving that she had not only a very sweet voice, but a cultivated articulation as well.

"Deceivin'," grinned Tony. "It's manners to draw it mild, ma'am."

"You are very kind. And that emboldens me to tell you what I think of you."

"I wouldn't have made bold to ask you."

A twinkle in the lady's eye showed that the allusion in Tony's choice words to her recent affectation of brogue, was not lost upon her.

But assuming a serious countenance, she said, quite gravely:

"I believe that you are an honest man."

"I hope I merit your good opinion, ma'am," he answered, bowing respectfully.

"More than that," the lady went on, "I think you are a kind man."

"I have a leetle woman at home, what agrees with you thar."

The lady seemed mightily pleased and not a little touched by this answer.

"I am glad of her happiness," she said, gazing at the rough fellow before her through a quick-coming humidity of the eyes.

"For her sake," pursued the girl, now speaking in a voice that went to Tony Dobson's heart, "I believe you would befriend a woman who needed friendship—that you would not carelessly betray her, I mean, in idle gossip, as some men would."

"Waal, miss," said Tony, who had somehow got an impression of the speaker's youth out of her appeal to his protection, "I don't know why you have opened up your secret to me, bein's as how you've got the nerve an' the sleight to carry it off so well. But you kin tie to me, ef mum's the word. I will say that."

"I have taken you into my confidence, because I am about to do something which might occasion talk by provoking idle curiosity; and I do not wish to be talked about—above all, inquired about."

"You hoe yer own row, miss, without mixin' or meddlin' from me."

"Thank you again. That is what I expected from you. And now, when do you return to Murderer's Row?"

"To-morrow."

"At what time of the day do you reach—say—this point?"

"I git into the Row jest after dark."

"Ah! that will suit me nicely. I intend to stop at Murderer's Row; how long, I do not know. I wish you to take my trunk with you, and fetch it back to-morrow; and I will meet you here and arrange for the final disposal of it. My movements are very undecided, so that I cannot predict them definitely twenty-four hours ahead. I shall meet you in a new character, and it is to forestall your curiosity, and to provide against your attracting the attention of others to me by commenting upon my movements, that I reveal myself to you now. I assure you—"

"You needn't, miss," interrupted the stage-driver. "In this country a man does as he pleases, an' no questions asked. I don't see why a woman shouldn't do the same. Your secrets air your own. Wherever you want your trunk took, you say the word. That ends the matter."

"You are very kind. And now, will you add to my indebtedness by fetching my grip-sack here?"

Tony went to the coach, and brought the sachel.

The girl opened it, and brought to light a complete outfit of clothes, as different from those she then wore as could well be imagined.

Her mourning attire was that of a person of modest competence—not elegant, yet sufficiently *a la mode* to show that she had the means to consult her taste without sordid pinching.

The dress taken from the sachel was of calico, and was accompanied by a sunbonnet of the same. The shoes were stout and homely.

Then from the depths of the sachel she drew a wig of red hair, and removing her hat, hid the raven beauty of her natural tresses beneath this disguise, adding the sunbonnet to complete the metamorphosis.

Canting her head archly on one side, and locking merrily up into the stage-driver's face, she asked:

"Do you think you will know me, when I have adapted my eyebrows and lashes to the sunset glory of this sorrel thatch?"

"I wouldn't 'a' knowed you, miss—I'll be bound!" ejaculated Tony, in simple wonder at the transformation.

"It's by me spaiich ye'll be after knowin' me, sor," she said, dropping him a courtesy that would have sent him off in a roar of laughter, but that she threw up her hand in hasty admonition.

"Hush! hush! What will they think in the coach? It is bad enough for me to come off here alone with you, as it is. Now you must go back at once."

But with the mischievous twinkle still in her eyes, she extended her hand in parting, with:

"Yer crubeen wanst more, ma bouchill! Sure, it's greatly I'm beholden to yez."

And finally, as he turned to go:

"God save ye kindly, sor!"

Yet, though she bore it out to the very end, Tony somehow received an impression, very much as he had with Vera Stanard, that there were tears just under her eyelids.

And this was true. For, scarcely was she alone, when they overflowed.

"Ah!" she sighed, "this is the miserable travesty we call life! We are all actors, and cover our heartaches with the mask of Momus!"

But she had work before her, with which, having dried her tears, she proceeded.

Taking from the sachel a morocco case containing the usual appliances for an actress's make-up, she carefully tinted her brows and eyelashes a shade of brown that would combine suitably with her dark red hair; then making a toilet-room of the chaparral, the frondage of which would screen her, like a modern Diana, from the gaze of any chance passer-by, she completed her transformation of character.

Emerging again into the stage-road, she tramped back to Murderer's Row; and instead of going to the Jack Pot, went to a shanty before which she had, from the passing coach, seen a woman washing clothes that certainly needed it sorely.

Here she found a shelter, winning her acceptance more, perhaps, by the display of money, than by her plausible story.

Once installed in the house, she found it the merest child's play to her tact, to turn the long tongue of her entertainer to her own account.

Under the most solemn pledges of secrecy, she was intrusted with the identity of "Mr. Stilwell," and informed at length of his relations with Vera Stanard.

Not only this, but she got the history of Dan Dirk down fine, with a shrewd forecast that all such knowledge might come in handy.

One thing she saw through with a woman's keenness of perception, though her gossiping hostess did not help her here—the meaning of Dan's conduct after Vera's departure.

"He is in love with her!" she determined at once. "She has roused in him memories of a better past, and overwhelmed him with remorse. If worst comes to worst I may be able to use this sentiment to my own advantage!"

The intriguante had stipulated for the privilege of unchallenged freedom of movement after nightfall, her shrewd hostess not scrupling to reckon it in her bill.

So, when the time came, she went her way—her way proving to be that taken by Mr. Jones Brown-Smith.

She did not go first to the Jack Pot, and trail him thence, but, as the hunter goes to the salt-lick or the ford, and waits, so she went straight to the domicile of the widow and her daughter, as if assured that this was the lodestone which sooner or later would surely draw him to it.

Lurking in the vicinity, she saw him approach the house and knock for admittance. She saw and heard Vera's greeting; and though she had every reason to expect that it would be such as it was, yet for a moment she was so overcome by it that it seemed as if she would burst from her hiding, and rush between the two.

The door closed upon them, and the woman outside put her hands to her head with a groan of rage and despair.

"It will surely come!" she moaned. "Who can resist him? I am betrayed and lost forever!"

Like some mad creature she raged about, goaded to uncontrollable restlessness by what her jealous fancy pictured within those enshrouding walls.

"She will love him in the end, if she does not already. His generosity—as she conceives it—will win her. He, the savior of her mother! What sacrifices he has made—for her sake! Ah! if the truth could be known!—the truth! the truth! that is always trampled under foot by the blind rabble of this world! But it shall not be! I will strip him of his mask! Ah, yes! and ingulf myself! How he has entangled me in his snare! But if he plays the cowardly renegade, what matters all the rest? I will not endure it!—I will not! I will not! Beware, George Gleason! You do not know of what a woman is capable, driven to desperation!"

She must have betrayed herself, had any one been near. But the spot was well out from the camp; and the nearest houses were dark with desertion.

During the interval that followed, in which the only event was the occasional tantalizing of her inflamed imagination by the flitting of a shadow across a window-curtain, the distraction of the watcher was terrible to witness.

But finally the door opened, and the objects of her jealousy came forth together.

Then the woman who had been as a wild beast caught in a snare, uttered a gasping:

"Ah!"

And, with her hands pressed on her bosom, she became as a statue of marble with a heart of flame.

But before proceeding with this new complication, let us see what had happened within the house.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD.

THE warmth of Mr. Brown-Smith's reception was exaggerated by the jealous watcher.

Far from flinging herself into the arms of a lover, Vera clasped his arm and hugged it to her as a sister might have done, while she drew him through the living-room, into the adjoining apartment, where her mother lay on a bed of helpless prostration.

As he approached the invalid, she murmured:

"George, my dear boy—my faithful, tender son, you bring me renewed life!"

He knelt at the bedside, and putting his arms about her, bowed his head upon her bosom, as if to receive her blessing, calling her mother.

She caressed his hair, murmuring brokenly with closed eyes, while Vera stood looking on with clasped hands.

"What have you to tell me?" she asked, when he lifted his head, to gaze at her pitying tenderness.

Lightning George—we may as well give him at once the name his life had won him—modulated his voice into keeping with his looks.

"You are safe, dear mother. Take heart."

"Safe!" she repeated, with a sudden outburst of indignant repudiation.

She sat upright in bed, tossing the blankets from her as if to get out, her cheeks flushed, her eyes blazing, her frame quivering with excitement.

"Oh, to be a fugitive from justice! Justice! Was there ever so monstrous a parody? The murderess of the man—oh, my beloved husband!—whom I would have given every drop of my blood to spare a moment's pain! And by poison!—the treachery of it! I cannot—oh, I cannot endure this! I must be vindicated!—I must! I must! I must!"

"Mamma! mamma!" sobbed the daughter, fondling her, and kissing the tears from her face, "do not *we* know you—we who love you so?"

"You can be vindicated, if you will," said George. "Remember, all this is against my advice."

But the distraught woman threw herself back on her pillow with a cry of anguish.

"At the expense of his reputation! I a murderess, or he a suicide—a defaulter! No! no! better I endure anything! Only, come quickly, dear God! Let me be reunited with him!"

At this inspiration, however, a poisoned thought sprung up in her mind.

A defaulter, a suicide, where could she meet him again?

The words died on her lips with a shudder of horror. A moment she stared dumbly into vacancy. Then, throwing up her hands again, she cried with hysterical wildness:

"Yes! yes! Wherever he may be, let me go to him! He is the best I have known. If he has need of me more than ever, I shall be content!"

"There was but one valid reason for leaving the world temporarily deceived," said George, with the steady persistence of one who wishes to prevail over mistaken sentiment. "If it had been suspected that it was the work of his own hand, I, as his executor, would have been pounced upon, his accounts inspected, and the whole unhappy affair blown to the four winds of heaven. But that crisis has now been tided over, and everything is safe. I at once deposited sufficient collateral to satisfy all of his creditors that every liability would be met as soon as it could be verified—a thing made quite easy by his reputation for business conservatism. No eye but my own has traced these accounts; and when everything is finally settled, they will be—accidentally—destroyed."

"Ah, we owe everything to you, my son!" murmured the elder woman, reaching out her hand in gratitude, and caressing his.

"You owe something to yourself," he amended, gently, clasping her hand between both of his.

"Never!" she demurred, stoutly. "Let the thing stand as it is. I shall be vindicated where alone it now matters; and that soon, pray God!"

"Mother! Have you forgotten me?" cried her daughter, passionately.

Then they wept in each other's arms.

"I do not wish to pain you," persisted George; "but the truth now ought to come to light—so much of the truth that will enable you to stand unchallenged before the world. No harm can come of it. We can safely draw the line of discovery where we will."

But the devoted wife answered in the stony calm of immovable resolve:

"For me it is enough that it would cast a shadow on the name that I would sacrifice my life to shield from the slightest blemish. But there is something to be said that may reconcile even you to submission and quiescence. Suppose we were to put forward the—"

With a choking sob she amended:

"This plea? It could not now be established—after my flight, a virtual confession."

"But surely the truth has a better chance for belief than falsehood."

She shook her head with a bitter smile.

"How many have learned the contrary in dumb wonder at the slumbering justice of heaven! What motive could be assigned? Your very precautions have removed them all. A man riding on the flood tide of prosperity, with everything about him to make life attractive. No! no! I should not credit that myself."

"But, on the other hand, what motive can be adduced in your case?"

"A woman's motives do not always lie on the surface. No one would have difficulty in conceiving hidden motives enough."

"And if we failed to establish it, should I stand forth any whiter, as having tried to malign the man I had slain?"

"But there *must* be some way out of this tangle!" he burst forth, with the unreasoning passionate protest of a consciously defeated man.

"No! no!" declared Mrs. Stanard, slowly. "I thank you for the security with which your kindness has riveted the chains that bind me. My loved one is safe! There is more happiness in that thought than will compensate all the misery the harsh misjudgment of the world can inflict."

"I bind you—to infamy!" cried George, in despair.

"And I would be bound!" she said, with a sad smile.

And taking his head between her hands, she kissed him on the brow.

The man bowed his head in the bedclothes.

"You are an angel!" he murmured. "None of us have ever been worthy of you!"

Vera pillowed her mother's head on her own laboring bosom and wept over her.

Borne to the crest of the wave of self-devotion by her great love, the woman, now that the matter was settled, succumbed to the prostrating reaction of overtaxed nature.

She lay fainting on her pillow, while her daughter flew about in quest of restoratives. Finally she slept.

Then Vera took the hands of George Gleason—for such was his true name—and thanked him again for all he had done for them.

Scarcely able to restrain his emotions, he asked her to recount to him the incidents of their flight; and, on the plea of not disturbing her mother, invited her out into the moonlight.

The house was far enough out from the active center of the camp, so that the sounds of carousal, the discordant music and boisterous singing, the yells, the laughter, the wrangling, were blended into an indistinguishable hubbub, softened by distance till it did not obtrusively mar the serenity of the night, nor rob the spot of the sense of solitude.

Neither guessed of the woman who, favored by the black shadows and their absorption in their own emotions, crept quite close to them, so that not a word spoken in an ordinary tone would escape her: so that, when it chanced that the moonlight fell full upon them, she could even see the expression on their faces.

CHAPTER VIII.

N UNWELCOME PASSION.

VERA talked with perfect freedom and with the animation natural to her, giving the man at her side a detailed account of the incidents of the flight which had enabled her mother to exchange a prison cell in San Francisco for an abode at Murderer's Row, with questionable advantage, she was almost tempted to maintain.

Without deliberate purpose, she dwelt chiefly upon her mother's experiences, her vicissitudes of hope and fear, the alternations

of indignation and despair, till at last he said:

"But yourself? You have told me scarcely anything of what you must have had to endure, in so trying and unaccustomed a situation."

"Oh, I? But for mother's trouble, I fancy I should have enjoyed it rather than otherwise. Everybody has been so kind—but the reception we met with here. Oh, that was dreadful! It prostrated mamma, I think, more than all the rest. That brute, Dan Dirk! I shall never forget him."

"Dan Dirk?" queried Lightning George, in pretended ignorance. "Who is he; and what had he to do with you?"

Vera told the story as it appeared to her, enlarging with grateful enthusiasm on the bold interference of Mr. Stilwell, whom she hoped to meet again, seeing that they were, after all, detained at Murderer's Row.

Having no intimation of her misapprehension, Gleason did not guess the identity of Mr. Stilwell, but supposed him to be what she said, a rancher of the neighborhood.

"So another, not I, was near to rescue you!" he said, with an ebullition of bitterness against this new rival in Vera's esteem.

"Oh, but we can't expect *everything* from you!" said the girl.

"We!" he repeated after her. "Why do you always include your mother? It is *you* that I aim to serve."

"Why, of course," she answered, vaguely.

"You *will* not understand me!" he burst forth, fiercely.

"Oh, George!" she exclaimed, in wondering reproach. "What is the matter? You appear offended. What have I done, or said?"

"To offend me? Nothing. You never have; you never could. But don't you see that you are torturing me beyond endurance? Who is this scoundrel, Stilwell, that he, a perfect stranger, has the insolent presumption to seek to insinuate himself into your favor? What—"

But from the height of his jealous fury, as a thunderbolt falls from a lowering cloud to the earth, he leaped to the one fact that lay at the heart of his distraction.

"Oh, woman! woman! I love you!"

And casting himself on his knees at her feet, he threw his arms about the astonished girl, and proceeded to pour out his long-pent passion in a flood of protestations, reproaches, endearments, vows, ejaculations, and even sobs of overwrought feeling.

For a moment the girl stood dumb with surprise, dismay, bewilderment, submitting helplessly to the onrush of the tide that overwhelmed her.

Then, seizing him by the shoulders, she shook him, to arrest his attention.

"George Gleason, what *do* you mean? Oh, this is terrible! Listen to me!"

But, overcome with wounded sensibilities, with something akin to the shame and horror that would have been inspired had he been her brother, her voice broke, and she sobbed:

"Oh, *will* you let me go? You have no right to treat me like this. It is wicked! It is cruel! Are you not ashamed to say such dreadful things to me?"

"Ashamed?—to pour out my soul in homage at your feet! Cruel?—to pledge my life to your service! Wicked?—to ask you to crown me with the blessing of your smile! What can I say to you that is kinder, purer, holier than this?—I love you!"

"But you are like a brother to me. It is shocking to have you do as you are doing. Oh, *please* to get up!"

"Like a brother! But I am not your brother!"

"I have never thought of you in any other way."

"But I am *not*! I am not! I am nothing more to you than any stranger. Have I less than the rights of a man, because I happen to have lived in the same house with you?"

"But remember, I was a little girl when you came into our family. You seem to me always to have been there—to have been one of us. Haven't we always played together as brother and sister? Don't you call mamma *mother*, as I do? I am sure she looks upon you as her son. Oh, I beg of you!—in kindness to me!"

"I curse the day I was ever brought into such association with you! But that need

make no difference with the present. You know me for what I am. There is no barrier between us. You will get over this feeling of strangeness. I have sprung this upon you too abruptly. But I have loved you so long and so ardently, it has seemed to me that every look, every tone, every gesture, must speak of it. And you have seemed to love me. What was your greeting scarcely an hour ago? Why did you embrace my arm? Why did you look at me with so divine a smile of gladness? Must I wait for you to declare your love in so many words, before I am justified in casting myself at your feet, with my heart on my lips, with my veins streaming liquid fire in the arms that enfold you? Oh, Vera! Vera! no god had ever my blissful privilege!"

But this was not as she would be wooed, even had there been no other barrier. In his virile impetuosity he rent the veil of sentiment too rudely.

Humiliation, the sense of outrage, made her fierce with indignation.

"Release me, sir!—release me!" she commanded, in a tone that needed no reinforcement from a struggle to free herself.

His arms fell away. His heart stood still. A soul, the reality of which she had never guessed in all those years of daily association, stared out at her through her set eyes. Hope was gone. Every shred of the illusion he had striven to hold before his eyes was torn away. He knew that she did not, never had, and never would have, for him, one throb of the sentiment he craved.

Slowly, with a labored effort he rose to his feet.

The girl supporting herself by clinging to a sapling, stood between sobbing and sighing, with a feeling that all was not yet said. There must be left no unilluminated corner for lurking misunderstanding. All must be clear between them.

With this resolve, she spoke, though he remained silent.

"You have covered me with shame!" she said, brokenly. "Your touch clings to me like a contamination. I—"

"Is it so bad as that?" he interrupted hoarsely.

She looked up at him, his face showing gray in the moonlight.

"You do not understand me," she answered. "It is not you, but I."

"Surely I do not understand."

"I mean that not I alone am concerned. You were wronging one who—who—may now never call me to account!"

She broke into a sob, but kept on determinedly.

"But I cannot escape from myself. I hold myself as sacred as one under a vow. Oh, I can never, never look up at him again!"

She hung her head, and tears rained from her eyes, falling sheer to the ground.

Clinching and unclenching his hands, panting with labored breath, Lightning George stood looking at her, drinking in the poison of her confession.

"You love some one?" he said hoarsely. And without reserve, she answered him:

"Yes."

"And you were to be married, but for what has happened? This has come between you?"

She did not see the fierce exultation in his eyes, nor hear it in his voice.

"There has been no engagement between us," she said, with a touch of embarrassment, though not wavering in her resolve.

"O-o-oh!" he exclaimed, with a sort of wondering contempt. "So you stood out against him, though you love him, with the same prudity with which you have scorned me, whom you hate? I have not so much reason to complain then, it seems."

"You are mistaken," gathering courage and dignity under the lash of his sarcasm. "in both your charges. I have not hated you, nor have I played the prude with the man I love. Is it prudery that makes me tell it to you openly?"

"You must at least confess that you become more and more enigmatical as we proceed."

"I shall not continue so, if you will bear with me."

Looking him straight in the eye, she went on, distinctly.

"Few women, prudish or otherwise, would

confess to you, under the present circumstances—indeed, in any circumstances—what I am about to. The man I love, and for whose sake I have striven to preserve a more than vestal purity, has never declared his love for me. Yet it is the wrong you did him that I should rightfully resent, had you known. I have given my soul to him. Your touch rests upon me as upon his wife. Why not?"

Lightning George burst into a laugh of acrid derision.

"Oh, come!" he ejaculated, "this is running sentiment into the ground! If you were never more a wife than that, you might have a hundred lovers."

She shrunk from him with a quick flush of indignation at his coarseness. Turning, she would have fled swiftly to the house without another word, but that he sprang before her.

"Oh, forgive me, Vera!" he cried, with a return of his passionate longing. "You do not know a man's pain. I am crazed with jealousy! I love you to madness; and you coolly tell me that you prefer one who, if he love you at all, has paltered, and hung balancing in nice consideration. And do you owe me nothing? Have not I saved your mother from imprisonment, if not the gallows; your father—"

"This is worthy of you!" burst in the girl, quivering with indignation and hurt sensibility. "Yes, I owe you all this, and more. I owe you the bread I eat, almost the clothes I wear! Thus far my dependence upon your generosity—the generosity of a stranger, as you have pointed out! has not oppressed me. It seemed natural. I looked upon you as my brother. But henceforth it will be as gall and wormwood to me! I will not endure it beyond—"

"Ah, will you misunderstand me? This is wanton perversity! I tell you of my devotion; and you taunt me with reminding you of your dependence! I long to have you utterly dependent upon me—so dependent that you must look to me to supply each want as it arises. To humiliate you? Oh, woman! To show you how gladly I would lavish all that I have and am upon you, finding my gratification in yours. Have I not stooped to misprision of felony for your sake?—ay, to felony itself! I did not stop at bribery—at corrupting the very guardian of justice! I protest my love; and you charge me with seeking to constrain your gratitude!"

His plea had every appearance of truth; but there is none so merciless as the inspirer of an unwelcome passion.

"It must be obvious to you," she said, coldly, "that this contention is fruitless. The more we strive to explain, the further are we from comprehension. But one thing stands clear, with few words, and no controversy. I do not love you! Now let me go, please. I regret the pain I may have caused you. I beg you to believe that any seeming encouragement I may have offered you was through inadvertence, and not from coquetry. I—I—can endure no more—not now. It will be a kindness to spare me further—"

She turned away; and, dumb with despair he let her go.

Then, wheeling as with a bursting heart, he fled the spot, only to stumble, before he had taken a score of paces, over something that lay across his path.

The moonlight disclosed a woman, lying prone, apparently insensible, with her face pressed to the ground, her fingers clutching it, as in anguish.

In wonder he stopped and bent over her, turned her face to the light, and gazed at it with an ejaculation of perplexity, which deepened, ere long, into a hoarse cry of concentrated rage.

CHAPTER IX.

A HOPELESS CONTEST.

CLUTCHING the prostrate woman by the shoulder, Lightning George fairly dragged her to her feet.

He did not speak further, but holding her in an iron grip, hurried her from the spot, not stopping till he had her at a safe distance from any chance interruption.

Then, so hoarsely that his voice was scarcely recognizable, even by her who knew it so well, he demanded:

"What are you doing here?"

"I suppose," she answered him, standing as one who patiently awaits a mortal blow, "you have brought me out here to kill me. Do not hesitate, but do it quickly. It were more merciful."

"Fool!" he almost roared, shaking her in his rage.

"Ay, a most pitiful fool!" she assented, in languid self-pity. "I lent ear to the oaths of Lightning George!"

Gleason stood in the condition of savage helplessness when murder seems a mild solution of one's perplexity.

At last he sat down on a fallen tree-trunk, leaving her standing before him.

"Well, Miss Winters," he said; "when you come to a rational frame of mind, I will listen to what you have to say for yourself."

She did not retort that explanation was due rather from him.

"Nothing!" she answered. "Only this—complete your work. You have brought me to this pass. You have no right to leave me so. You are bound to give me my release, if you are not a coward, as well as a villain."

"Oh, rot!" he scoffed, with an utter abandonment of that decency which demands considerate treatment for a woman in whatever situation. "Talk at me anything but shop! As the heroine of melodrama, you are successful only behind the footlights. Save all that for your manager. He pays you for it because fools pay him; but for his private entertainment, I have no doubt he would find it as stale, flat and unprofitable as I do. Let us have no more of me Lady Murderous, if you please."

"There was a time when the actress you now condemn was more to your taste."

"Never! I detested her from the first. It was the woman I was after—and I got her!"

Delivered with a leer of triumphant derision, never coward dealt a more dastardly stab.

It pierced the woman to the soul.

"You brute!" she sobbed, completely crushed. "You have no consideration—"

"Not an atom!"

"Man! have you a soul?"

"Not about me, that I am aware."

It was useless, beating against a stone wall of conscienceless brutality.

The woman fell to sobbing again.

"If I have quite gratified your curiosity respecting my poor self, suppose we begin at the beginning once more. Why have you followed me?"

"To satisfy myself of your perfidy."

"I thought you were satisfied of that before I left San Francisco."

"I have made assurance doubly sure."

"And are therefore ready to take the return coach, I presume, for the Golden Gate."

"Hardly!"

"No? May I ask the purpose of your delay?"

"I have no plans as yet; but I shall remain on the spot."

"Awaiting inspiration! Let me play Satan—"

"Your accustomed role!"

"Ha! ha! That was your cue; wasn't it? Well, here's your inspiration, any way. Make the most of it."

And bending forward, he whispered into her ear, in burlesque of the stage Mephistopheles:—

"Unmask the villain!"

"I'll consider that," returned the girl, recovering something of her coolness.

He laughed, with a vein of bitterness running through his contemptuous indifference.

"You will bear your tale to ears that incline to it only too readily. But for that very reason, is it worth your while? You must have overheard the whole of the charming interview just completed."

"Oh, never fear! If I have ever been in doubt about you, I know you now by heart."

"Excellent! You will have no reasonable ground for complaint of anything I may do in future. Forewarned is forearmed; but it also bars the plea of imposition. Surely, we ought to get on more amicably after this. And here's a chance at hand for a new beginning."

"A witness to the interview, you need no further assurance that your jealousy has no material grounds."

"No grounds!"

"With the lady so obdurate?"

"And you? Is it nothing that you have given your soul to her?"

"Which she declines with thanks? Excuse me, sir!—I have a prior engagement! Don't that settle it? Come! come! you are getting sentimental. Suppose I were in love with a statue. Would you insist on having its marble nose broken off?"

"That is all nonsense! A man who has never declared his love for her, and never will! You will stop for such rubbish as that; and she will laugh at it when she has changed her mind."

"By all the gods of Olympus, I hope you are a truthful prophet! But I misdoubt me. A woman is a contrary beast, when she gets set. You have taught me that lesson effectually."

"You cannot laugh me out of my convictions. You know very well that you will find some way to get round her. You have every opportunity. She is absolutely dependent upon you. She owes you already—"

"But! but! but! my dear! Suppose I get round her, as you say?—and, by Jove! I owe you something for the revival of my hope!—but is not that the arrangement? And are not you to share in the proceeds of this temporary intrigue?"

"The arrangement! It was no arrangement of mine, sir! You know that you have never consulted anything but your own selfish will. You never cared for me. When your fancy was gratified, you cast me off, and used me as a tool to your next step in villainy. That you should marry her was no part of our bargain. It may have been a part of your purpose—"

"It was—from the beginning."

"You carefully hid it from me, till the evil was done, and it was too late to recede. I was then at your mercy."

"Are you less so now, my dear?"

"I have lost the hope that made the strength of your hold on me. You now have me bound by a rope of sand! I warn you! Beware! A desperate woman will do anything! I care little what becomes of me—"

"Now that I appear to be lost to you! Really, I didn't know you set such store by me! So, to drag me down, you would destroy yourself?"

"To prevent you from consummating this cruel wrong upon me."

"It would be imprisonment for life, if not death by hanging!"

"Let it be so!"

She had remained standing just in front of him.

Taking her unawares, he reached out, threw his arm about her waist, and drew her upon his lap.

"Do you mean it?" he asked, with an intense concentration of voice, holding her close.

"Yea, I do! Let me go!" she commanded, struggling violently to free herself.

But instead of releasing her, he fell to kissing her silently.

With a great cry of despairing love, she threw her arm about his neck; and then, hiding her face in his breast, wept as if her heart were breaking.

He had conquered! She was purchasing the present with coin of future misery! She knew that, well enough. Yet she lent an ear to his pleading, false as she believed it to be.

"I don't know that we can ever be happy together," he said, as if constrained to frankness. "I'm afraid we have both too much of the tinder-box and mule in our dispositions. But one thing is certain, little Julie!—you will always have the power to draw me away from any other woman. You fight me, and call up all the devil of my nature; I torture you by every means in my power; yet through it all I love you as I have never loved any other woman. I love the fire in you, your desperation, that will have all, or wreck all. Look here!—I am going to tell you everything, and then throw myself on your love and good sense. It is not merely for the sake of the fortune that I wish to make Vera Stanard my wife."

"I am aware that you love her besides!"

"There you go again! By Jove! it takes a patient man to bear with you! But, let me go on. The having Vera Stanard as my wife is necessary to my personal safety."

"Oh, pshaw! You can't impose upon me like that."

"I tell you, it is true. As my wife, she cannot testify against me. Otherwise, she will learn that which will enable her to put me behind the bars, if not worse. What she now knows is not enough to arouse her suspicions; but before her father's affairs are settled, she will inevitably make discoveries which will enable her to put two and two together, and blow my house of cards into the air. When she makes those discoveries, her lips must be sealed."

"Now, here is my pledge. Within one year of my marriage I shall be a widower. As soon after that event as Mrs. Grundy will give her consent, you shall reap the fruits of your forbearance, so, trust in me. We will go to Europe, and bury all this miserable business in oblivion."

"You will work your will in spite of me," said the girl, as if weary of the fruitless contest. "But do not look for me to consent to give my place to another woman. Never! never for a single instant! Do you suppose I have no feeling? Would you wish me to be indifferent to so monstrous an outrage? It is sometimes difficult to believe that you are really human, you perpetrate such heartless cruelty with such business-like coolness."

All that Lightning George ever cared for was submission. He went on, as if, absorbed in his future plans, he scarcely heard her protest.

"I am going to put you back in that household on a more confidential footing than ever," he went on. "I shall tell them that I withheld the knowledge of your coming till assured of the success of your efforts to rejoin them. Such devotion will win upon them so that little will be left for your tact. The disposal of the mother will be an easy matter when the time comes; but you must keep her alive till then. She is our hold upon the daughter."

"What!—more of death? Oh, horror!"

"Needs must be when the devil drives. What have we been working for?"

"To save you from the consequences of your recklessness."

"And I, while we are in for it, stand for something more. What's the difference between a sheep and a lamb, when either is a hanging matter?"

"You have submerged me in crime, and you will continue to drag me in deeper and deeper into this yawning gulf of horror!"

"That is all sentimental nonsense. Come! let us to work."

And his project was carried out—to Tony Dobson's surprise, yet not a little to his satisfaction, when he learned that his jaunty passenger had returned to her former role, and why.

"I'm glad you've j'ined 'em, miss," he said. "Your shrewdness won't go amiss fur 'em."

Mrs. Stanard wept her gratitude; Vera kissed the arch-traitress on the cheek; and she—wept as readily as either, with no sign of aversion toward her rival.

Assured of her devotion to his cause, Lightning George went away with a peculiar smile on his face.

"Now for this *King!*" he chuckled. "I will make him my vassal. Ha! ha!"

CHAPTER X.

LEADING A DONKEY BY THE NOSE.

LIGHTNING GEORGE proceeded at once to the Jack Pot, and engaged Pat McMurrin in conversation over a glass of the ardent.

"Brisk country this," he began. "I have just been hearing of the call Dan Dirk and his gang made on you the other day."

"Well, they had a bit av a circus," admitted Pat. "But b'ys will be b'ys. They're no great harrum in them, I'm thinkin'."

"Eh? And do you stand the racket so cheerfully? I should think it would be a severe tax upon you, if he calls very often."

"Niver a wan o' me. Dan Dirk pays as he goes."

"Oh, that's it? And you, you rogue! have, then, an interest in encouraging his visits."

"Sure, he follies his own notion. Whin he's heur, he's heur; an' whin he ain't, the divil himsilf wouldn't fetch 'um."

"But his men drop in on you once in a while, I suppose, on their own account."

"They be fur gittin' thirsty, like other mortals."

"And is it possible that these fellows move about at will, when they are known?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I should think Judge Lynch might have a writ to serve on them once in a while."

"Fur paintin' the town red? Faith that's nothing."

"But is road-agenting nothing, too?"

"Road-agintin', is it? An' whose been road-agintin'?"

"Why, hasn't Dan Dirk?"

"Faith, I dunno. How would I?"

"By common report."

"But common report hangs nobody, sor."

"But you have evidence enough that the stage has been pulled up? Say yesterday."

"Oh, the stage has been pulled up often enough. Bnt by whom?"

"By Dan Dirk, of course."

"Kin you prove it, sor? It's aisy fur to shoot a man fur yer own amusement, in these pairts; but it don't come so aisy fur to hang him be the forrums o' law."

"Oho! Delightful country, as I think I have before had occasion to remark."

"It agrees wid most pable, sor, av they don't be afther carryin' too loose a tongue in their head."

"Eh? By Jove! is that a warning?"

"A wurrud to the wise. You must have heard that before, sor!"

"Indeed I have! So rogues run at large here, and honest men keep their mouths shut! Are any of the gang here now?"

"None that I see, sor."

"Where do they hang out? I suppose he has a ranch at no great distance?"

"Well, that I can't just say, sor. It's up country somewhayer."

"I should think the resort of so notable a character would be well known."

"Pable in these pairts don't be over curious, sir."

"And those who happen to be so by nature?"

"They mostly move on, sor."

"Between two days?"

"I'm not sayin' that, nor am I sayin' ag'in it. But I nivir wint huntin' Dan Dirk mesilf."

"I think I sha'n't!" laughed Lightning George.

Nevertheless, he did a curious thing.

Seating himself at one of the tables, he closed his eyes, and threw his whole attention into the sense of hearing.

For perhaps half an hour he sat thus. An observer would have supposed he was asleep.

All sorts of men came and went in the room. Still he did not move.

Finally a voice shouted:

"Why, blast yer eyes, that thar's what I call snide!"

Then Gleason gave a just-perceptible start.

Turning his eyes carelessly in the direction whence the voice came, he saw a man holding a card suspended over the board, while he looked with frowning discontent at the last play of his opponent.

It was the ruffian who, participating in the persecution of Vera and her mother, had introduced himself as "yer Uncle Ben."

In his voice Lightning George had recognized one of the masked speakers concerned in the attack on the coach.

The fact was, that Uncle Ben was very fond of his own "chin-music," and seldom lost an opportunity for its enjoyment.

A wordy wrangle followed his charge of unfairness, in which it appeared that both he and his opponent were too maudlin to have any very definite idea of the game they were playing.

Blood might have flowed in consequence of their misunderstanding, had not Gleason, sauntering over to the table, interfered.

"Hello, Uncle Ben," he saluted, as familiarly as if he had known the inebriate or years, though the fact was he had learned his name during the course of the quarrel.

"What's the row?"

"Why, this blatherin' Hebrew is tryin' to swin'le me out o' me ducats!—yer Uncle Ben!—an ole man with a fam'ly o' young chil'ern to s'port!"

"Who's a Hebrew? Who's swin'lin' you? Who's an ole man? Who's—who's—who?"

The righteous indignation of the accused goaded him into incoherence.

Rising out of his seat, and swaying unsteadily on his groggy pins, he flourished a huge bowie with about as much uncertainty as he had wielded his tongue.

Uncle Ben was not slow to accept this challenge.

"Why, you, you monkeyin'—"

"Hold on! hold on!" admonished the mediator. "We don't want any gore here this evening. What is the reason we can't straighten this thing out satisfactorily to all concerned? Jakey always plays a pretty square game—"

Gleason's knowledge of Jakey was not more extensive than his acquaintance with Uncle Ben; but his "gall" was equal to any requirement.

"That's the way to talk it!" interposed Jakey. "That's what I call a gen'leman an' a scholar. That's a gen'leman what knows me; an' he knows as I'm all right. Knows a squar' deal w'en he sees it."

"Blank my two eyes ef it's all right!" insisted Uncle Ben.

"But look here," pleaded Gleason. "This is your card—"

"O' course it is," corroborated Jakey, though the fact was that Lightning George had cleverly abstracted it from Jakey's own hand. "Jack o' Clubs. That ain't nowhar! Jack o' Spades—that's mine. Hold over ye's squar's a die."

"Whar's my card?" growled Uncle Ben, churlishly.

"Why, here—the Jack of Clubs."

"Not by a blame sight! The Jack o' Spades is mine! I'll have blood, but I'll stick to the Jack o' Spades! That monkeyin'—"

"But you had the right bower—"

"You bet yer sweet life!"

"And Clubs are trumps."

"O' course they be," assented Jakey, who looked upon the mediator as his friend, though he did not clearly follow his adjudication.

"Not by a—"

"Look at your hand, man!" cried Gleason, holding it up before the excited Uncle Ben. "If Clubs aren't trumps, where are you? Nowhere!"

"Wha's the matter with the hand?" asked Uncle Ben, who began dimly to comprehend that the decision was going in his favor.

Jakey vaguely repeated:

"Nowhar!"

And with the impression that, by the arbitration of this gentleman and scholar he was "somewhar," he reached for the stake.

"One moment!" interposed George, politely. "Play the hand out. A pot is never won till the last card is dropped."

Meanwhile, Uncle Ben, now satisfied with the appearance of his hand, joined with the arbitrator.

"Stand yer hand, blast ye!" he cried, truculently. "I'll wax ye with the hull deck up yer sleeve!"

"Wax nothin'!" retorted Jakey, gathering up his cards—the ones assigned to him by the peacemaker.

With much fierceness on both sides, the hand was played through, Uncle Ben winning with a yell of triumph.

"That's science! Wiped up the floor with him, with the hull deck up his sleeve! Go fur yer Uncle Ben, will ye? We'll find you a tenderfoot to practice on!"

"Uncle Ben was all right. A mistake is a mistake," urged Gleason. "Uncle Ben never used a man hard in his life. And Jakey—why, we're all ready to swear by Jakey's play, with our eyes shut. Let's have a drink to good-fellowship. What's the matter with that, gentlemen? You'll all join us."

And though neither Uncle Ben nor yet Jakey had any clear idea just what sort of a mistake it was the mediator had set right, they both accepted his arbitration without demurrer, and moreover accepted his invitation to the bar.

After that Uncle Ben was profuse in his demonstration of affection for Lightning George. By his account, he had known him from a boy, and introduced him to the crowd as the son of his oldest and "solidest" friend.

They would henceforth have been inseparable, had it depended altogether on

Uncle Ben's love; but Gleason got the old fellow to leave the saloon alone; and when he followed, nobody guessed that it was to rejoin the man he had so oddly ingratiated himself with.

Finding Uncle Ben wandering about like a lost spirit, George soon had him steered out of the camp, while he plied him with liquor and questions.

Uncle Ben was easily led to tell him all that had happened in his eventful life during their separation; and the wonders he evolved out of the depths of his inner consciousness would have made a book hard to believe.

By a little clever steering, Lightning George shunted him off the main track of heroic imagination, onto the side-track of prosaic fact—the fact of his present connection with Dan Dirk's gang of outlaws.

"Why, look a-hyar!" cried Uncle Ben, with a sudden glimmering of recollection, "ain't you some relation to the fel' what scooped in the ole man, t'other day? Took him in, body an' breeches! Haw! haw! haw! You orter seen it. Good's a play! Better'n a play! Better'n two plays! Haw! haw! haw! Mus' 'a' been brother o' yours—cousin o' yours—some er'lotion to yer wife's mother'n-law!"

He winked, with a most astonishing distortion of one side of his face, and poked Lightning George knowingly in the ribs.

"But, look here, Uncle Ben. I've made up my mind to join the band."

"What? No! Ye hev'?"

"If you fellows will take me in."

"Take ye in? Put 'er thar fur ninety days! Take ye in right away—to-night. Come along."

Gleason pumped the old fellow till he got a tolerably accurate description of the way to the road-agents' retreat some time before they reached its vicinity.

Meanwhile Uncle Ben was getting more unsteady on his legs, and less and less coherent in his talk. And, by a curious coincidence, the whisky was getting lower and lower in Lightning George's canteen, though he himself drank none of it.

Finally Uncle Ben was induced to sit down by the roadside to rest. Then his flickering lamp of intelligence went out entirely. He was soon snoring lustily on the broad of his back.

"I might leave him here, for all he'll remember to tell after he comes out of this," reflected Gleason. "But some of his crowd may come along and cart him off. I want him where I can put my hand on him. He'll count for one."

And with no little difficulty he gathered up the limp mass of humanity, and got it on his back.

He was just about to set off with it away from the road, to leave it in hiding out of sight and beyond the range of those rasping snores, when a break in the clouds let a flood of moonlight through.

"Eh! what in Cain's that thar?" cried a voice at no great distance.

Lightning George looked round, and saw two men approaching.

"Hallo, pardner!" called one of them, with a careless familiarity which indicated that he supposed he had run upon a comrade. "Who's down?"

Dropping his burden as if it were a sack of stolen potatoes, Lightning George without a word set off at a run into the undergrowth.

"Hold on! That ain't squar'!" ejaculated one of the men.

"You bet!" responded his comrade.

And without further discussion, they rushed in pursuit of the fugitive.

CHAPTER XI.

A CASUAL CALLER.

LIGHTNING GEORGE had already proved his quickness of wit and nimbleness of body. He now showed that he was as light of heels as of hand.

But he had two good men after him.

One of them was no less a person than he who had urged his merits with not over-weening modesty as "the boy in leather breeches."

Now Billy Buckskin, as he was otherwise known, prided himself especially on his fleet-

ness of foot; and by many a contest had he proved that this was no vain boast.

It chanced that he had in his company another—whom we have not hitherto met—who also aspired to make a reputation as a runner.

More than this, the Left Duke—such was his significant sobriquet—was no mean boxer.

It did not take long for Lightning George to discover that he had at his heels men who were worthy of his metal.

Spurt as he might, he heard their regular footfalls, as they thundered on abreast, each realizing that they were after a man who promised to give them an uncertain race, and neither willing to wind himself just at the start, so that the other might come in at the finish and "clean him up."

On the other hand, it was hazardous to hold off too much. The obscuring of the moon might at any moment place them at a common disadvantage as against the quarry.

Presently Gleason began to run heavily, as if he had expended his strength in the effort to shake his pursuers at the first burst.

"He's a good man; only he don't know how to handle himself," reflected the Boy in Leather Breeches.

Then, summoning his own strength, he spurted, so as to gain quite a lead of his competitor.

Just then the moon was obscured, and George, who had been running in the open, plunged into a clump of scrubby brushwood.

"Close in on him! He'll give us the slip!" cried the Boy in Leather Breeches.

And now, bending all his energies to the task, he cleared the ground at a rate that would have done credit to any athlete.

When he reached the point where Gleason had plunged among the undergrowth, he realized that the fugitive had pulled up, apparently relying upon the darkness to cover his retreat while he stole silently off.

"Hush! hush, Duke!" he cried. "He's playin' possum! Hark fur his footsteps."

The pursuers now stopped, and separating somewhat, began to grope about.

"Hyar he is! I hyear him breathin'" shouted Billy Buckskin.

There was a furious rush, in which heavy bodies went crashing through the foliage.

Then came a dull groan, and a heavy fall.

"Whar is he? Have you got him? Hang on! I'm with ye!"

But the Left Duke had not interpreted the sounds correctly.

Not desiring to escape them from the outset, George had played them very fine. Leading them on till exactly the right moment, he had purposely put himself in the way of the Boy in Leather Breeches, when, by the sounds they made he knew that his pursuers were at just the right distance apart to suit his purpose.

The finish of that last rush was, that Billy Buckskin got a clout on the jugular that knocked him completely out of time.

The Left Duke came in for a similar compliment; but the darkness stood his friend, and he got the blow just above, instead of just below, the ear.

He felt as he afterward acknowledged, as if he had been kicked by a mule; but he had had many a rap of that sort before, and now stood up under it, though it staggered him.

The next instant he had grappled his man, in spite of Lightning George's agility.

"Now I've got you, boss!" he declared, giving him a grip like that of a grizzly bear.

"Hang on to me!" responded Gleason, treating him to a return compliment of very much the same character.

For a time there was a furious thrashing about the bushes.

The Left Duke, who was not long in discovering that he had got hold of an extremely awkward thing to handle, was not ashamed to call to his comrade for help.

"Billy, jump in hyar an' bear a hand! Whar be ye, Billy?—Billy!"

The last was a shout. It was followed by a howl of pain, which ended in a groan. Then the hubbub subsided. The Duke was "down."

"Hold on, pardner!" was his appeal, now in tones submissive enough. "You've got me. I reckon you've broke mein two!"

"I'm sorry for that," returned George.

"You're too good a man to spoil. You're the best I ever had hold of, I think."

"I won't be good fur nothin' after this. You've fixed my back. Don't try to lift me, boss. Oh! oh! Let me lay, do!"

"Pardner," said Gleason, "if you're so hard put to it as you profess, I'm sorry for you. But you can't blame me if I am unwilling to take any chances—"

"You 'low as I'm lyin' to ye?"

"I am making all sure. I don't ask you anything; and you don't tell me anything. But I'd rather have you tighter than is absolutely necessary, than not quite tight enough."

And George proceeded to bind his man hand and foot.

This done, he found the Boy in Leather Breeches just recovering his wits, and soon had made him equally secure.

"I'll trouble you to go far enough away from this spot so that there will be no danger of you two rolling together, and releasing each other," he said.

"You're the boss," admitted Billy Buckskin. "You've done us as I wouldn't 'a' believed any a livin' man could do the two of us. Who be you, boss, anyway?"

The moon answered for Gleason, by suddenly revealing him to his prisoner.

"Waal, I'm blowed ef it ain't the galoot as got away with the ole man!" declared Billy, recognizing the hero of the stage-coach adventure.

"Dry up, will you?" cautioned the Left Duke, who did not care to be thus identified with the road-agents, though the chance of his being brought to book was exceedingly slight.

Lightning George laughed.

"Don't worry about that. I knew you both from the start."

"Be you going fur to leave me hyar alone, boss? I ain't in a very good fix," petitioned the Left Duke.

"When I have accomplished what I have set out to do, I will send you help. I sha'n't keep you waiting long."

Then he went away, and at no very great distance left Billy Buckskin in a similar situation.

Returning where he had been obliged to abandon Uncle Ben, he took him apart from the road, as he had proposed, and left him as he had the others.

He was now in the vicinity of Dan Dirk's retreat; and it was because of this fact that the members of the gang had set out in pursuit of him.

Making his way cautiously, he soon came in sight of a group of log huts, from which came the sounds of a rather riotous set of men having what they conceived to be a good time.

In one of the houses a fiddle was being scraped, with more regard to volume of sound and quickness of time than to melody; and the way some one was "hoeing it down" seemed to warrant the enthusiastic cheering of the spectators.

In the midst of these huts a log fire was burning, its lurid flames casting bars of light far out through the trees.

It was while passing through one of these that Gleason was discovered, after he had spent some time in reconnoitering the spot.

"Hallo, pardner! What's the row?" asked a voice close beside him, and he knew that he was under the eye of Tom Curtin.

But he had this advantage. His dress being like that of the outlaws, he was not recognized as a stranger, and Tom spoke to him without suspicion, only wondering at his odd lurking movements.

"The same that got the drop on your chief, the other day," replied Lightning George, presenting his "gun" in due form.

"Eh?" ejaculated Curtin, taken entirely off his guard.

"Hands up! No back talk!" commanded Gleason, peremptorily, though, of course, in a guarded tone.

But "business is business," Curtin's hands went up with all proper dispatch.

"What be you after, boss?" he asked.

"Your battery, to begin with," responded George, proceeding to disarm his prisoner with a deftness which marked all his movements. "I need scarcely warn you that I am likely to stand no foolishness."

"I know a business man when I see him," declared Curtin. "You've got me. I know

that well enough. You lead what you like; an' I'll give ye suit ef I've got it."

"All that will be required of you is to take no chances on your life. You understand that."

"You bet!"

"We'll wait here a few minutes, if you please."

"All night, ef you say so."

"Which of those is Dan Dirk's hut?"

"The one to the extreme right."

"Ah! there he comes out of it, now. Where is he going?"

"I reckon he's goin' to see a bit o' the fun."

"How has he been since I saw him last?"

"Blue. I reckon he didn't like the gruel you ladled out to him, boss."

"He didn't, eh? Well, if he has any complaint to make, he shall have the chance. He will find me awaiting him, when he returns to his sanctum."

"Boss, you ain't goin' in thar?"

"Why not?"

"Through the crowd?"

"If none of them stop me any more effectually than you have, or than three of your comrades whom I have left at various points along the road, I fancy I shall reach my destination without much difficulty."

"But what be you 'lowin' to do when you git thar?"

"I will give you a chance to see, as I intend to take you with me."

"But you ain't layin' fur the King?"

"Laying for him?"

"You've got a gall equal to 'most anythin'; but you must know that the boys will rub you out, even ef you git away with him."

"Don't you borrow trouble on my account, my dear sir. Come along. Ef any one hails you, you must see to it that I am not discovered. If you fail, I shall have to incapacitate you for witnessing my interview with your chief."

"I'll do the best I kin, boss. But the best-intentioned man fails sometimes."

"I can't afford to consider intentions. Success is what I am after. See that you don't fail!"

Then, at the ordinary swinging gait of a Westerner, the two set forward, passing boldly in sight of any one who might chance to be lounging about.

Gleason took the single precaution to slouch his hat rather more than was usual, so that his face might not be distinctly made out.

They were in the full light of the fire, when some one hailed Curtin.

"Hallo, Tom! Is that the Duke with you?"

"Don't you worry about the Duke," replied Curtin. "He'll lay you out as quick as you're ready fur him."

"I'm waitin' fur him now, suckin' my paws to stay my stomach."

"Oh, give us a rest! A wind-bag I do despise!"

The fellow laughed.

To cut short further inquiry, Curtin affected to enter into conversation with his companion.

He was playing, with, as he supposed, his life at stake; and he did it very cleverly.

So they entered Dan Dirk's hut, the other shouting after them:

"The ole man ain't in thar. Shall I call him?"

"No!" said Gleason, hurriedly, to his guide. "Head that off!"

"Blast you! stow your gab!" shouted Curtin. "You're a heap too fresh."

And ahead of his captor he entered his chief's hut.

"Now, my dear sir," said George, "make yourself at home. We await the return of the owner of this snugger. Comfortable quarters."

And flinging himself into a chair at a table on which several candles were burning, he took up a paper which had apparently been entertaining a recent reader, and elevated his feet to the top of the table.

Wondering at this cool proceeding, Tom Curtin remained standing, till, looking up, Gleason directed him to a seat.

So Dan Dirk found them, to his not slight astonishment.

"Ah, my dear sir," exclaimed Gleason,

throwing the paper carelessly down, "I have come to call upon you."

"You are very welcome," said Dan, rather mechanically.

"It's a pity your men are not of so hospitable a turn as yourself. They have given me no end of bother, getting access to you. Nothing to complain of—nothing to complain of! Don't apologize, my dear sir! They are civil enough now. You will find them along the road between here and Murderer's Row."

Dan turned to his subordinate with a look of wondering inquiry.

Tom hung his head.

"The one civil one that I have met, besides yourself," said Gleason. "Our friend escorted me in here with distinguished courtesy."

"I think we can dispense with his further services," said Dan, slowly.

Tom glanced at Lightning George in mute appeal.

"Oh, by the way!" ejaculated that gentleman. "Your weapons! Excuse me for my thoughtlessness. Allow me to return them with thanks."

Never did a humiliated man receive anything more sheepishly than did Tom Curtin the return of his arms.

He fairly slunk out of the room.

"And now, sir?" asked Dan, waving his guest again to the seat from which he had arisen.

Lightning George disposed himself comfortably.

"I have called," he said, "on a little matter of business."

CHAPTER XII.

A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT.

"You are welcome, Mr. Brown-Smith, I beg you to believe," said the King of No Man's Land, "though I must remark that you have your own peculiar way of presenting yourself."

"Oh!" returned Gleason, with a careless shrug, "we all have our little idiosyncrasies. I never like to have people make a fuss over my reception. I prefer to walk in upon them, and say *Good-day!* without ceremony."

"Decidedly without ceremony! But allow me to offer you a glass of wine. You appear to have been under some considerable exertion, and will probably find refreshment not unwelcome."

"My dear sir! If I had had opportunity to make a toilet, I should not present such a spectacle."

"Due to the discourtesy of my men?"

"To be frank with you. But please to forget it. They are charming fellows, every one of them. Especially that Left Duke of yours. Cherish him, my dear sir. He's worth his weight in gold."

"He can usually give a fair account of himself. May I venture to ask whether you have exchanged civilities with any more of my men?"

"His comrade. That humorous fellow. The Boy in Leather Breeches, doesn't he call himself? A capital runner. I will testify to that any time."

"So he ran from you?"

"On the contrary! After me, with pluck unsurpassed. I commend him to your consideration."

"And that is all?"

"Well, our dear Uncle Ben! Ha! ha! ha! He quite won my heart."

"I congratulate you, sir."

"Not at all! not at all! It is you who are to be congratulated, on the possession of such treasures."

Dan Dirk frowned. Was this sarcasm, or genuine appreciation of the powers of his men he had outwitted or overmatched?

The King of No Man's Land was humiliated, almost as much as he had been by his own misadventure. These were his best men. Who was this fellow who played with them with such gay sangfroid?

"You have more than the usual amount of self-confidence, my dear sir—"

George was amusing himself with the formation of a series of rings of smoke, which he watched in their ascent toward the ceiling. He only turned his eyes upon Dan's face, as he interrupted, with a quiet smile—

"Fairly well based, don't you think?"

"No doubt. But you remember the jug that went too often to the well?"

Gleason shrugged his shoulders carelessly, and blew gently up through the last ring of smoke.

"It is evident," pursued Dan, "that the identity of the man who was privileged to enjoy your society—"

"Pardon the interruption; but appreciation as well as politeness prompts me to urge that the privilege was on the other side. My dear sir, the identity of that charming gentleman is no secret to me, as you would say. Hence my presence here."

"But that recognition involves consequences to me worth considering. There is very little law in this community not of my administering. Still, I do not take any chance stranger unreservedly into my confidence."

"I have recently been discussing that point with our host, McMurrin. It is seldom that one who officiates so acceptably at one bar is so well fitted to adorn the other. He pointed out to me the difference between a moral certainty, and legal evidence."

"In spite of which, you venture here?"

"My dear sir," said Gleason, straightening round as if he were now ready for business, "I have found, in my varied experience of life, that upon one thing you may safely count in all men."

"And that?"

"The guiding influence of self-interest."

"You hope to show me that we may have interests in common?"

"Exactly. I am here on business. I have come in my own way to show you that I probably have a past behind me; to convince you that when I put my hand to an enterprise, it is with a fair prospect of success. Would you not rather have dealings with a man of resource and vigor, than with one whose shilly-shallying left an open door to failure?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Very well, sir. For a similar reason I have come to you. I am intent on my own business. I want my own ends answered. I have no time to meddle with the affairs of others. You can serve me, I believe. I am able and willing to requite that service. We will then shake hands upon it, and go our several ways."

"What can I do for you?"

In the most explicit terms Lightning George stated what he wanted. In the matter of terms he proved a very easy man to deal with; higgling at nothing. But he required pledges in return; and these Dan Dirk gave.

"The word of an ordinary man," said Gleason, in conclusion, "counts for very little with me. I have found that it is usually well to keep the reins in your own hands, no matter what the fair seeming of others. But I have learned that, with you, a pledge counts for something. Hence my exaction. I rely upon you without uneasiness."

He then rose and took his departure, accompanied by men who would look to the Left Duke's comfort, if he were indeed seriously injured.

Having escorted him to the border of the camp, Dan Dirk turned back, but not to re-enter his hut. He walked apart in darkness, ruminating gloomily.

"This is what I need," he reflected. "Let me work some wrong to one of her own sex. I will frighten her image out of my heart."

Selecting such of his men as he wished to accompany him, he rode at their head into Murderer's Row shortly after midnight.

Lightning George had preceded him, securing, on his arrival, a clandestine interview with Julia Winters.

"Miss Stanard must be worn out with care of her mother," he observed. "She will take advantage of your attendance to secure a good night's rest."

"She is very anxious. Her mother is so nervous about this place. Vera intends to sleep on the settle."

"In the same room? Oh, no!—in the living-room, of course?"

"Yes."

"You must prevent that. Induce her to occupy the room immediately above it. I depend upon your tact."

"Why do you wish her to sleep there?"

"The reason you will give her, is the greater chance of unbroken rest. To yourself you may assign any reason you please. It is enough for you to know that I wish to break up her mother's habit of close dependence upon her. To what end?"

Lightning George answered that question with a shrug which implied that it was an impertinent one, and so turned away.

He stopped, however, to add:

"One of your chief excellences is, that you are not meddlesome. If you chance to hear anything in the night that does not concern you, pass it by without prying curiosity. Good-night! Pleasant dreams!"

And he went finally, cocking his hat jauntily over one eye, and whistling softly a stave from a comic opera.

The girl stared after him in wondering pain.

"He must be the devil incarnate!" she almost sobbed. "That is a covert command. Whatever happens, I am not to interfere with his nefarious work. What can it be? What foul play is he hatching in that fertile brain of his? What can he do to her? Surely, he dare not intrude upon her. He would not destroy all his chances by such foolhardy impertinence as that. What can it be?—what can it be?"

But rack her brain as she might, she could not conceive anything that would be to his advantage.

As much as he had made her suffer, she did not yet perceive a tithe of Lightning George's iniquitous capabilities.

So, with bitter forebodings, yet unable to penetrate the mystery of her master's enigmatical words, she entered the house.

It was not difficult for her to suggest in directly to Mrs. Stanard that her daughter ought to have rest. The mother's generous disposition fell in with it so easily that she scarcely noticed that the hint came from her devoted attendant.

It was she who urged upon Vera that she take the more distant room.

"I must get over that foolish whim of mine," she said, drawing Vera's hand caressingly to her cheek, and adding with a wan smile:—"I am no great champion for you, in case of need. And now that George is here, I delegate the office to him. But you are looking quite pale and worn. Go, dear; and return to me in the morning more like your old self."

Vera did not reveal the cause of the pallor and restlessness which her mother attributed to her too faithful vigils. She allowed herself to be persuaded to occupy the upper room, aware of no reason against it, and confident that Julia would attend her mother as faithfully as she herself.

Relieved of anxiety by the presence of one whom she looked upon as a son, Mrs. Stanard slept more soundly than she had at any time during her flight.

Outworn, Vera fell into a profound and dreamless sleep!

Only Julia lay, most of the time with wide-open eyes, and now and then dropping off into a fitful doze, only to start out of it with a feeling of vague alarm.

Once she thought she heard Vera moving; but listening, all was quiet. Again she imagined that she heard footsteps outside the house. But a gust of wind, sweeping the branch of a tree against the house, drowned these suspicious sounds before she could make sure of them.

Did she doze again? How could she, at that critical moment when the one hope left her broken life might be trembling in the balance?

With an agonizing thrill of terror she started up, her ears ringing with a woman's shriek.

Was it an actual sound, or only the phantom of a distempered dream?

"Oh, Julia! Julia! what has happened?" quavered Mrs. Stanard, starting upward in bed. "Where is Vera?"

"Hush! hush!" admonished her attendant, going quickly to her, and pressing her back upon her pillow. "You will wake her; and she needs sleep so much, you know."

"But what was that screaming?" persisted the invalid.

"It was not loud enough to disturb her, I think. Listen! No; she doesn't seem to be stirring."

"Was it I that cried out? Oh, I have had such a horrible nightmare! I thought that that ruffian was again seizing my dear child. I shall never recover from the agony of that moment."

"Do not distress yourself, dear Mrs. Stanard. That is past and gone. Here; take this composing draught. You too need sleep."

The invalid submitted, and sunk to sleep holding the hand of her attendant, and thanking her for her devotion.

The moment she was thus freed, Julia Winters rose, and stood pale as death, trembling from head to foot, while she looked in the direction of the chamber to which Vera had retired.

Not a sound could her strained ears catch. Apart from the low breathing of the invalid and the pounding of her own heart, the house was as still as a tomb.

"No! no!" she suddenly burst forth. "I will not submit! Come what may of it, I will struggle on to the bitter end, to circumvent his villainy. I would stand passive while he struck a dagger to my heart; but this thing he shall not accomplish, if I can prevent it."

Then, as if her feet were winged, she sped up the stairs to the chamber above.

What she was to find there, she more than half guessed, even before she had the proof that her fears had not outrun the dread reality.

In the darkened room she could of course see nothing; but the chill night air coming in through the open window struck a thrill of fear to her heart.

Groping about, she soon satisfied herself that the room was now empty, though the bed had been occupied.

Then the woman's strained heart seemed to burst with rage.

"Now, by all of womanhood, he shall not do this thing!" she cried, with clinched fists. "I, who have thus far been his cat's-paw, will become his Nemesis. I care not what becomes of me; but he shall not so trample on my heart."

She was a woman of resource, driven to desperation. Lightning George might have done more wisely not to rouse her.

Descending the stairs like a mad creature, she rushed into a room which had been assigned to her, and plunging into the depths of the trunk she had brought, drew forth a garb altogether different from any she had yet appeared in.

No one but a person of trained skill could have made the change so quickly as she did. In an incredibly short time she stood forth, to all outer appearances a youth of nineteen or twenty.

In no point of dress did she differ from a rather dudish young borderman. Her arms were unexceptionable, her bearing beyond criticism.

By way of practice, she drew a revolver, cocked it, and let down the hammer, with a deftness which showed that she was perfectly familiar with the weapon.

"Now I am ready!" she declared. "He who has conquered men has only a woman to cope with; but let the event prove how he will come out."

Confident that Mrs. Stanard was asleep, she stepped boldly forth into the general living-room, only to be confronted by that lady, who had started out of a nightmare into dazed wakefulness, and, finding herself alone, had got up with a vague idea of going to look after her daughter.

Mrs. Stanard put her hand to her heart, and stood in speechless terror.

Though recognition was next to impossible, Julia Winters did not dare to risk it. At a bound she crossed the room, burst open the door, and leaped across the threshold.

She heard Mrs. Stanard calling faintly to her by the name she had assumed on entering her service. Then she called to her daughter.

Receiving no reply from either, the distressed lady tried to make her way to the stairs leading to the upper story, but, finding herself turning faint, she endeavored to retrace her steps to her bed, that she might not fall in a swoon.

At the door of her room the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon her startled ear, arresting her as by an electric shock.

She turned to face the intruder, whoever he might prove to be; and a man staggered into view out of the darkness, and fell prone across the threshold.

Effectually disguised by the blood streaming down his face, the terrified lady did not recognize him, though in happier surroundings she had known him well enough.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

Thus sounds that had haunted Julia Winters were no trick of the imagination.

Out of deep slumber Vera Stanard started, with a sense of wild alarm.

She was about to start upright in bed; but a weight, as of a heavy hand, held her down, while a hoarse voice breathed into her ear:

"Not a sound, not a movement, on your life!"

The girl's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. The cry that struggled for utterance in her bosom was choked short off in her throat.

Trembling and panting with terror, while an icy ooze started from every pore, the girl finally demanded:

"Who are you? What do you want with me?"

"I wish you to get up, dress yourself, and accompany me, without alarming the house?"

"I refuse to go with you!"

"Do not compel me to retract my commendation—"

"You cannot induce me to accompany you voluntarily."

"I am of a different opinion; and as you are discreet enough to adapt your voice to the requirements of the situation, I am willing to discuss the matter with you."

Never was a cooler villain than this. Who could it be?

Vera thought of Gleason. But, from what she knew of him, it was impossible to connect him with such outlawry.

Then she thought of Mr. Stilwell. Besides George, he was the only man she had met with whom the speech of her present assailant was in keeping. But the voice, in a whisper, was robbed of all its distinctive characteristics.

"There is no room for debate," she declared. "I refuse flatly to move."

"You will then force me to a resort from which I would refrain, if you make it possible."

"And that?"

"I shall be compelled to put you under the influence of chloroform."

This threat told. The girl quailed under it.

"I am not altogether disinterested," he went on, in the same careless way. "It will be easier to have you accompany me of your own free will, than to have to carry you bodily."

"Who are you? Why are you doing this cruel thing?" panted the girl, her courage giving out.

"We shall have ample time to discuss that to-morrow. For your present comfort, however, I will assure you that you have nothing to fear in the form of personal violence. Come! time presses."

The man had been kneeling beside the bed. He now arose.

"I believe you have too good sense to try to escape me," he said. "This you may depend on—if you force me to it, you shall never leave this room alive. Now, then, if you please, get up and dress yourself—of course, so quietly as not to attract attention from below."

In the black darkness Vera could not see her assailant. She took it for granted that he had stationed himself somewhere between her and the door leading below, so that she could not go in that direction without running into his arms.

There was no recourse but to comply with his demands; and trembling so that she could scarcely stand, the girl groped her way into her clothes.

During this process she could not even hear the obtruder into her chamber breathe, and so could form no idea how near he might be standing to her.

He judged of her movements by the rustle of her garments, and when this ceased, demanded:

"Are you ready?"

"Oh, sir!" the terrified girl suddenly burst forth, "I beg of you to spare me! It is not only I; but it will kill my mother to know that I have fallen a victim to some ruthless abductor."

Dan Dirk gave a violent start.

Her mother! Whose mother? For a moment it seemed that he recognized the voice of the woman who had filled his thoughts ever since he had seen her lift her veil from her terror-blanching face.

"Bah!" he scoffed within himself. "I can hear, see, think of nothing else but her! Shall I never banish her from my mind?"

So vivid was the impression she had left on him, that now her face, in luminous lineaments, seemed to start out of the darkness, and gaze at him in reproachful pleading.

"What!" he cried to his wavering heart, "shall she soften me toward this wretched creature, whoever she is? By all the furies, I'll not be haunted like this!"

And, in a rage at his better self, he reached out in the darkness to clutch his victim wherever chance might direct his hand.

"Enough!" he growled; and now his voice, had he spoken aloud, would have had little in it to remind the listener of the gentle suavity of Mr. Stilwell. "Remember my warning. I will kill you without scruple, if you attempt to balk me. Now, get out of that window."

From that moment she never dreamed of appealing to him further. Not his words so much as his tones spoke a ruthlessness which even brutal Tom Curtin could not surpass.

Trembling so that she could scarcely move, the girl got out of the window onto the roof, her captor holding her by the wrist in the grip of his iron left hand, while he menaced her with a bowie in his right.

Together they moved down the incline to the eaves of the lean-to.

"H'st!" signaled Dan.

"All right!" came the response from below.

"Now then," said Dan to his victim.

And taking her by the wrists, he lifted her off her feet, swung her out over the edge of the roof, and lowered her to his companion below.

The latter received her in his arms; and the moment she got a whiff of his whisky and tobacco laden breath, she was confident that she was in the power of the man she believed to be Dan Dirk.

"Now, my beauty," he said, his coarseness in marked contrast with the gentler breeding of the other, "we're hyar on business. Don't you furgit that. Walk the purty gait what's nateral to ye, an' you're all right; but come one fancy step on us, an' you're nowhar!"

Dan Dirk cut his subordinate short by dropping lightly to the ground.

"Now then, no time is to be lost!"

And the victim was hurried forward between her captors.

When they reached a group of waiting men and horses, the full consciousness of what had befallen her, the thought of her mother's suffering when she awoke to her terrible bereavement, the feeling that even death itself was not worse than this, goaded her to a desperation in which her captor's threat lost its power.

One wild shriek burst from her lips.

But Dan Dirk, on the alert, perceived when it was coming, and enveloped her head in a blanket in time to cut it short midway.

There was a moment of furious struggling, followed by a sudden relaxation, and dead quiescence.

"Now then, boys! into the saddle!" commanded the chief.

Quite near to these midnight abductors, a man stood motionless in the darkness, gathering what was going on entirely from the sense of sound, since nothing could be distinguished by the eye.

We need scarcely say that it was Lightning George, watching the progress of his work.

"Good! So far all goes well," was his comment. "Now to bed, to awake in the morning to astonishment and chivalrous devotion. Ha! ha! ha!"

But his mocking internal laughter was cut short by a sound proceeding from the center of the camp.

The wind, blowing from that direction,

brought voices to him with unusual distinctness, considering the direction.

"What was that?" demanded an anxious voice.

"A scream, sartain."

"A woman's scream! And in this direction. Which way do they live from here? Oh, if I should be too late!"

"Don't take on, stranger. It ain't nothin' out o' the common to hear a woman scream in these parts. They're all the while clapper-clawin' an' yawpin'—"

"But in which direction do my friends live?"

"That way, sure enough."

"Then let us find out at once whether this has any meaning for me. Something tells me that I am too late, after all! Come! come! Ask any reward of me you please—"

"Stow that thar."

The two speakers were now running toward the spot.

At the sound of the first speaker's voice, Lightning George started in utter amazement. Then a wave of fury swept through his dark soul.

"He? he? Can it be possible? No! And yet—by my soul, I believe I have detected the thing in him! Oh, it is preposterous! She would never stoop to him. And yet, it is he. What is he doing here? What friends can he have in this out-of-the-way place, but them? Curse him! does he presume to balk me? I'll show him whom he has locked horns with!"

And clinching his fists, he ran forward to intercept the approaching men.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW HAND IN THE GAME.

"CAN you tell me of the movements of two ladies—a mother and daughter—who have passed over your line within the past week or so?"

The question was asked by a young man whose personal appearance and general manner had interested Tony Dobson more than the passengers in his hearse usually did.

He had the scholar's pallor, with blue veins showing at the temples, and flexible, sensitive lips. But for one thing, one might have set him down as possessing the refinement of a gentleman, but lacking the force necessary to a hand-to-hand battle with the world.

That one thing was the intensity of his eye.

"Thar's good stuff in him," Tony had decided at once. "Maybe he has come into this country to fetch it out. Maybe, though, he's been waked up already, an' put in his lick in the wrong place. I don't like the anxious way he has about him. He may be givin' legs to the sheriff."

As long as he confined himself to appreciative, though rather absent, observations on the beauties of the scenery, Tony was communicative enough; but the instant he sprung the foregoing leader on him, the stage-driver retreated into his shell.

"Oho! A Frisco detective, maybe! I'll see him hanged!"

This to himself as quick as flash; but he very deliberately rolled his quid into the other cheek before he replied aloud:

"Waal, now I can't just say as I remember any sitch as you specify. Thar's Parks's widder—I know her by name, though not to speak to. Then thar was that daisy outfit from Santa Fe. I reckon, stranger, you ain't trailin' her down?"

"My good, sir," demanded the other, with clear, steady, level glances, "have I the appearance of a gentleman?"

"A—uh—what?"

"A gentleman. Do you believe that I am an honest man? Would you take me for a persecutor of women?"

"Waal, to be downright honest with ye, I don't set up fur no great shakes of a judge o' sitch things on sitch short acquaintance. I find most men knows a likely woman when they see one, an'—"

"You are trifling with me. I will set you the example of frankness, and see if I cannot win frankness from you in return."

"Spiel away, boss. I generally plays suit when I've got it."

"Well, then, I have followed into this country two women whose faces you have probably not been allowed to see, because of

their being persistently veiled, yet whom, having once seen, you could not mistake nor forget."

"But how should I know 'em, boss, ef I never see their faces?"

"By their manner. That could not be disguised. By their voices, if you have chanced to hear either of them. You do not have so many of their kind in this country or any other, that they are likely to be lost in the crowd."

"Hold on, stranger. You needn't go no further! I git your drift. You want me to put you on to these hyar ladies? Waal, I'd see you hanged before I'd help you ag'in' ary woman in the world, young or old, good-lookin' or humbly! Ef I knowed what these hyar were, what you're after—"

"Will you give me your hand? Waiving the woman for the present, you are just the man I am after."

The stage-driver was snubbed up with a round turn in his generous flight. He stared at this self-complacent young man, and then answered slowly:

"I reckon I'll wait a bit before I do. I'll take time to size you up first."

"I'll help you, by resuming my story where you clipped the thread of it. Let me introduce myself as Max Rankin, of San Francisco."

"You might be that, an' the devil to boot, an' me none the wiser."

"You look me in the eye, as I proceed, and size me up—in your own words."

"I'll do that, boss, Spiel!"

"I am the bookkeeper of the late Harold Stanard, Mining Broker, of San Francisco. I was faithful to him living; dead, I set myself to vindicate his traduced memory. For his wife and daughter, the ladies of whom I am in quest, I would lay down my life, if necessary. I have assumed the detective role, to block the most stupendous game of villainy that was ever perpetrated. Again I ask you—do I look like a persecutor of women?"

"No, by the Lord Harry!" shouted Tony, suddenly won over by the young man's honest manner.

They struck hands on a mutual understanding.

"Boss," said the stage-driver, "I 'low to be able to spot a square-toed gent when I see one; an' I'd go my pile on you. What's more, I'll go the young lady's pile. But ef you scoop us in, I'll kill you, as sure as my name's Tony Dobson. I say us, because I'm goin' fur her solid. I know she's got a hard row to hoe before she gits out o' this country ag'in; an' I'm helpin' her hoe it, ef I see my chance."

"You have seen her then?"

"You bet!"

"And she is well?"

"God bless her! she's as peart as a chipmunk in the spring!"

"And her mother?"

"That's rlight, young man. Don't you furgit the mother! But she ain't so chipper. Got somethin' in her upper story what don't work smooth."

"God knows she has reason! Never was a poor lady so outraged. And have they been followed by a man who pretended to befriend them?"

"By no man, pardner, that I know of. But as likely a young woman as you ever see has followed 'em out hyar, an' found 'em O. K."

"The monster!—the harpie! And she imposed upon you? Well might she! She has the arts of the Arch Fiend!"

"Hold on, stranger! What's the row with the leetle woman with the handy brogue? Hang me, ef I wasn't a man o' fam'ly—but thar! I'll stow that."

Whereupon Max Rankin told him a story that made him stare in amazement, not altogether unmixed with incredulity.

"I wouldn't 'a' b'lieved it, ef anybody but you had said it," he declared slowly.

"I'll prove the truth of my words," promised the detective. "All I ask is, that you confront me with her."

"I'll do that before—"

Then there was a lurch that made the coach shriek out in every joint. The reach snapped, letting the body of the vehicle down between the wheels. Max Rankin was thrown from his seat.

Amid the bumping and the grinding of the

wreck, and the cries of alarm of the imprisoned passengers, Tony Dobson alone managed to stick to his place, and curb his rearing and plunging horses.

Of all who stood looking at the wreck, when it was ascertained that no one was seriously hurt, none stared so blankly as Max Rankin.

"At this time," he cried, "when, of all moments in my life, I can least afford delay! How long will it take to repair the damage, friend Dobson?"

"We could cut a saplin' to do service as a reach," answered Tony, who had been accompanying a detailed examination with a running fire of equally detailed execration; "but thar's a wheel what's past doctorin'."

"But I cannot stand idly here."

"I'm sorry fur yer, an' sorrier yet fur them as is dependin' on ye; but thar ain't nothin' fur it but to foot every mile o' the way to Murderer's Row. Ye could git a hoss at Fiddler's Bend, though."

"What's the reason we can't take these horses? I wish you to accompany me."

"I reckon we could, ef the company's agreeable."

"But you are in charge here. It is for you to decide. And you know my urgency."

"Waal, gents," said Tony, "ye see how we're fixed. We can't all ride on two hosses. The mail goes through when anythin' goes. It's luck we hain't got no Express. Them kin foot it as is impatient. Them as kin take the hard luck o' this wicked world more serene, kin set down hyar at poker, say, till I kin send back help. Speak yer minds, gentlemen. Everybody has his say in this land o' liberty."

"I am very anxious to get forward," declared a little man, so inoffensive in appearance that no one had paid any attention to him thus far.

"We're all anxious," said the stage driver dryly.

"What is the reason we cannot ride double?" asked the little man. "I would not stand for a trifle in advance of my passage money, not to be left behind."

"The mail goes with me," repeated Tony. "Ef you kin make any arrangement with this hyar gentleman, the hoss is free."

"Suppose we ride in company as far as Fiddler's Bend?" suggested Max. "Then one of us can get a fresh horse."

"I am greatly obliged to you," declared the little man. "Allow me to present my card. My name is Nivins—Nivins of Virginia City. If you ever come my way, and I can return this compliment, I shall be glad to do so."

"Don't mention it," said Rankin. "And now let us lose no more time."

So they set forward, leaving a rather surly company behind them.

At Fiddler's Bend Max Rankin made sure that the one to get the fresh horse was himself, though Mr. Nivins, in a quiet way, made desperate efforts not to be outdone.

He tried to make up for the disadvantage of having to ride a jaded horse, by setting out before Max, who waited for Tony, the stage-driver, making it a point not to "get left" in the matter of a fresh mount.

So it happened that they passed Mr. Nivins, and entered Murderer's Row in advance of him.

Tony would have been puzzled, Max perhaps startled, could they have heard the little gentleman's reflections when they left him in the rear.

"So he has shaken me, after all. What will the old man say when I give in that report? I'll take it kindly if he don't bounce me off the force," with a laugh, as if there were a joke in his words.

However, Tony Dobson and Max Rankin entered Murderer's Row, with no rattling of the coach to warn any one of their coming.

It was past midnight. The camp was still in sleep.

"Let us leave our horses here, not to startle them," proposed Rankin. "But take me to the house at once. I shall not sleep till I have had speech with the ladies in the morning. Meanwhile I will take no chances, but watch that nothing happens to them between now and then. I can't afford to leave the slightest loophole for misadventure."

"I'm with you, pardner, though I don't reckon nothin' is like to happen to 'em in the dead o' night."

And together they set out for the house occupied by Vera Stanard and her mother, leaving their horses before the Jack Pot.

They had made not a quarter of the distance when they were startled by a scream—a woman's scream beyond all question, though it was cut short almost before it found utterance.

Then followed the anxious conversation which warned Lightning George of their approach, apprising him of the identity of the man who had come to nip his plot in the bud, and causing him to set forward single-handed to meet him and his ally, sturdy Tony Dobson.

Most men would have thought twice before undertaking such a task; but Lightning George was used to playing a lone hand, no matter what the opposition. Thus far, success had attended upon his boldness.

In the coming encounter he had the advantage of being forewarned, though his opponents were two to one.

Placing himself where they must pass within arm's length, he drew a revolver, reversed it in his grasp, and firmly awaited them.

Winged by anxiety, Max Rankin was in advance.

"Come on!" he cried. "Don't you hear them? There is some devil's work going forward here."

What he heard was the tramp of horses in rapid retreat, realizing his worst fears by bearing Vera Stanard to a most hateful captivity.

"We shall be too late!" he cried. "We should have our horses—"

But the suggestion was cut short.

Out of the darkness shot a hand; and Max Rankin went down without a groan.

Dark as it was, Tony Dobson saw the blow, and realized what it was, in time to leap to one side, and so avoid stumbling over his companion.

But a dusky figure leaped after him; and a blow, grazing his ear, struck him where the neck joins the shoulder.

It was no love-tap, that. Tony Dobson felt that his arm was nearly paralyzed. Yet he grappled with his unknown assailant, and made a good fight.

Would he best Lightning George? In strength he overmatched him. But that redoubtable individual was as active as an eel.

CHAPTER XV.

A WARM RECEPTION.

LIGHTNING GEORGE had called the Left Duke a good man; but when it came to a "b'ar hug," he found the athlete's peer in the sturdy stage-driver.

Never had he felt such a grip as Tony Dobson gave him.

"It's fur the leetle lady an' her mother," reflected Tony. "This hyar must be the chap that's a-takin' of 'em in. I'll give him the best I've got."

But his best failed in competition with the eel-like suppleness of his antagonist.

Though the breath was nearly squeezed out of his body, Lightning George managed to keep up a rain of blows on Tony's head with the butt of his revolver.

This was bound to tell in the long run, even through an unusually thick skull. A lucky hit settled the matter; and with a groan the stage driver relaxed his muscles in insensibility.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Lightning George, shaking himself free from the embrace that had nearly put a serious check on his hitherto successful career, "that's the closest call I have had so far. I'd like to know who that fellow is."

But there was no time to lose.

"Rankin here!" he kept on. "He must have smelt me out. I might finish him off; but he probably has not come here alone—certainly not with the secret, whatever he may have discovered in his sole possession. Suppose he has found out the only part of the matter that he can get admitted in a court of justice? That's no hanging matter. With Vera's lips closed, I can silence him."

"But if I put a knife into him, and into this other as well, how can it be brought home to me? There might be circumstantial evidence enough to ground moral con-

viction; but legal evidence is another matter. He is close upon me. The risk is terrible, either way."

Both his victims were at his mercy. Never had the life of either Max Rankin or Tony Dobson hung by so slender a thread. There was no conscience in the matter. It was merely a question of policy.

That consideration finally settled it; for, while he wavered, Lightning George was brought to a decision by the sound of a galloping horse.

"Some comrade whom they have outstripped," he thought. "I sha'n't want fresh blood on my knife after he has found two dead bodies here. I'll give you good-day, Mr. Rankin; but the next time I exchange compliments with you, I hope for better luck."

And he glided silently away in the darkness.

The approaching horseman was Nivins of Virginia City. Whatever his relation to Max Rankin's general plan, he did him a service by riding into Murderer's Row at that particular moment.

However, unaware of what was going on, he did not approach the scene of that silent, though desperate conflict, but drew up before the Jack Pot, roused the landlord, and inquired after the riders of the horses standing before his door.

McMurrin, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, and internally anathematizing all late arrivals, stared at the horses.

"An' who be the owners o' them?" he asked. "Faith, I dunno. How would I?"

"I did not ask *who*, but *where*."

"Who or whayer, sure it's all wan to me. They're not in my house, bad luck till them, whoever or wherever they be."

"But they have arrived here safely, and only a few minutes ahead of me. See—their horses are tied, and are not yet done blowing."

"Thru' fur you, sor. But what thin?"

"Something must have called them from their purpose of entering the house. They must be somewhere about the camp."

"That might well be. You're at liberty to hunt them, if they are friends o' yours."

"I think I'll look about a bit, if you please, before turning in."

"Take yer toime, sor. In the mahrning will suit me as well as anny other time. We have breakfast at six. But av you might be thinkin' o' rousin' me out ag'in—"

"Have no uneasiness. I shall not disturb you, and will pay you for your present trouble before I leave the camp."

"You're a gentleman, sor; an' annything I kin do fur yez—"

"Nothing, thank you."

Nivins turned away and went prowling through the darkness, while McMurrin stood scratching his head and reflecting on the probable results of his ill-temper.

Though the camp was small, Nivins had the misfortune to set out in the wrong direction to begin with, so that his reconnoissance took up some time.

A woman's shrieks finally drew him toward the further side of the camp, and desiring a light hitherto hidden by intervening shanties, he ran toward it—careful, however, not to betray himself.

It issued from the open door of the house in which Vera Stanard and her mother had found refuge.

Loth to bring his person within the bar of light, Nivins reconnoitered the place from a distance, but uttered a cry of astonishment and dismay at what he discovered within.

Another had been before him. Let us accompany that one.

The blow that put Max Rankin out of the game was delivered with skill and force. It was an accident of the darkness that made it partly glance, so that the trigger-guard of the revolver scored a wound on his scalp from which the blood flowed freely.

The necessity of encountering Tony Dobson the instant after, prevented Lightning George from looking into the effectiveness of his work, as did the approach of Nivins later.

Max was not long insensible. When he came to, he felt a weight resting across his legs, which examination proved to be the body of the unconscious stage-driver, whose punishment was much more severe than the detective's.

"What can have happened?" asked the puzzled man, slowly gathering his wits.

The blow that knocked him senseless had been without warning. Only the lump on his head and the flow of blood told him that he must have been struck by some one. But by whom?

"Can I have had a struggle with this fellow, and not remember it?" he asked himself. "Impossible! Some one else must have got away with both of us. We were surprised; and I, being in advance, got the first blow. Whoever dealt it knew where to make it effective. I wonder how seriously he has hurt my stage-driver. Can he be dead, poor fellow?"

If alive, Dobson gave no evidence of it. He was as limp as a rag.

"I must go for help," reflected Rankin, vaguely.

So benumbed were his faculties, that he had no clear recollection of the object that had brought him thither.

Languidly he got upon his feet, only to turn sick and faint.

When he caught the glimmering of a light, it seemed at a great distance, and swam unsteadily before his vision.

Of course it was his head that was at fault, with the humming-top that Lightning George had left in it.

With the gait of a drunken man Max Rankin staggered toward the light, forgetful of Vera Stanard and the wrong he had come to forestall; only vaguely conscious of the need of help for his recent companion.

The light seemed to recede before him. Now it came near; now it almost disappeared; suddenly it seem to blaze full upon him.

The light, only the flame of a tallow dip, dazzled his weakened powers of vision. Indistinctly he saw some one or some thing standing near it. It seemed to him like a sheeted ghost, so tall, so slender, so white, with fluttering wings or drapery—he could not distinguish which.

He staggered a step or two further, and with an indistinguishable mumbling fell headlong across the threshold.

At that his waning consciousness was stung into renewed life by a shriek that seemed to fill the universe.

What he saw, blurred by the insensibility which was closing down upon him again, was Mrs. Stanard, as she had risen from her bed. What he heard, was her shriek of terror at the sight of him, streaming blood from the wound Lightning George had inflicted.

This was what Nivins of Virginia City found—a woman distracted with fear, and a man lying prone on the floor; not dead, for he strove feebly to rise, but seemingly helpless.

The man was he with whom he had parted not more than half an hour before, in the full vigor of young manhood; the woman he recognized at a glance.

His first impulse was to spring to the assistance of the latter. His second thought was:

"But what if I am taken as Rankin's assailant? They may lynch me before the truth can be made out!"

Even as the reflection came to him, he heard people stir.

Doors and windows were thrown open in various parts of the camp.

The timid curious contented themselves with poking their heads out of the latter, to gather what they could by listening, or by hailing some passer-by.

These for the most part were women. The men, as a rule, rushed into the street, full armed, though not in all cases so completely dressed.

"Hallo! What's the row?"

"That was a woman, wasn't it?"

"You bet! It fetched me up standin'."

"But whar away was it?"

"Off hyar some'ers."

"Sam Moffatt goin' fur his woman, most likely."

"He polished her off purty well the other night. He'd orter give her a rest fur a spell."

"I say the thing's gone on about long enough. What he wants is some one to show him how it is himself; an' I know jest the feller to larn him the lesson."

"Cheese it, Andy! You hain't no call to mix or meddle thar."

"I hain't, eh?"

"Waal, some says you hev. I leave it to your common sense."

"Common sense be blowed! Come on! Ef that's Sam Moffatt ag'in—"

"It ain't. Sam ain't in the camp. I happen to know it."

"It come from the direction o' the new ladies' shanty."

"No! Is that so? I say, fellers, I always 'lowed as thar'd be a row thar before the thing had simmered many days."

"Come along; an' stow yer gabble!"

All this and much more Nivins of Virginia City heard shouted from various quarters.

The men were approaching at a run. If he would save himself from suspicion, at least, he must hide himself away without stopping for examination.

He scuttled off very like a criminal, and had gone scarce ten strides, when he was suddenly trapped by an unseen waylayer, thrown to the ground, and securely held, while his captor shouted lustily:

"This hyer way, fellers! I've sacked one on 'em."

"Hold on, my good man," expostulated Nivins. "I have had nothing to do with this any more than you have. I was attracted by the shrieks."

"We'll see about that when we come to show you up."

"But I have a special reason for not wishing to be known in this matter."

"I reckon ye hev, stranger!" chuckled his captor.

"You do not understand me. But there is no time for explanation. If money will—"

"It won't. Don't you waste your breath."

"Then—"

And, driven to desperation, Nivins struggled to free himself, at the same time drawing a knife upon his assailant.

"Oho! That's your leetle game, is it!" ejaculated his captor. "Waal, I've played at that before. I have half a mind to shove it up under your jacket, only I'd rather have the fun o' secin' you dance the jig that don't call fur no pipin'."

Nivins saw the folly of that moment of vexation when it was too late. He was surrounded in a moment, disarmed, and dragged into the candle-light.

"An' who might you happen to be?" was the suspicious demand.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN HOT WATER.

THE Frisco detective would probably have fainted, but for the stinging stimulus of Mrs. Stanard's shrieks. As it was, he strove to rise and allay her fears by making himself known.

"My dear Mrs. Stanard," he urged, though much as a drunken man would have done, "I beg you not to fear me. I come as a friend—as a rescuer. I bring you assurance of safety, of justice at last."

Neither recognizing him nor heeding his words, the sore-beset lady saw that he was at present powerless to injure her, and recovered her self-possession sufficiently to hasten back into her room and throw a wrapper about her trembling form, in time to receive the men who came rushing up, soon followed by others bearing Nivins of Virginia City as prisoner.

Then came the demand as to who he might happen to be.

"Gentlemen," answered the captive, now facing boldly the lowering judges, that gathered about him, "you force me to a revelation which I should have preferred not to make at present."

"That's jest what we do," interrupted a burly ruffian. "An' we'll knock the eternal socks off o' you ef you git that tongue o' yours tangled."

"I am a detective," declared Nivins.

"Oh! A detective, eh? Waal, this hyer ain't an overly healthy climate fur detectiv's. I know one layin' up yon in the high lot now, what come hyer without no intention o' settlin'. But we settled him. He got the Rocky Mountain in-flew-endways, an' died on our hands."

A general laugh greeted this sally.

"What might be your business hyar, in your line o' trade?" asked Nivins's captor.

"I am here to arrest that lady, for murder."

"Waal—I—will—be—blowed!" drawled the other. "Natty Nutter has lived to hear this hyar. That thar's too good to keep. Dan Dirk must hear of it. This hyar mangy dog is trespassin' on his domains."

By the way in which this was received, Nivins realized too late what sort of a community it was he had come into.

Without further ceremony he was hurried from the spot, bound, and thrown into a corner, to await the pleasure of the King of No Man's Land.

The citizens of Murderer's Row proved themselves adepts at this sort of judicial procedure. They who robbed outsiders—murdering them when "crowded"—almost with impunity, were great sticklers for law and order when it came to the regulation of strangers who assailed any of them.

There was neither much law nor much order about it; but such as it was, it was all they had to show in that line; and they lost no opportunity to "keep their hands in."

Nivins disposed of, they left Max Rankin no cause to complain of partiality.

"Come, boss! What be you doin' hyar? Been tryin' to burglarize this hyar lady, eh? We'll hitch on to you, ef you please, an' show you a trick worth two o' that. Git right along, pardner! You can't play 'possum on us."

By this time Rankin had fairly recovered himself.

"But, gentlemen," he expostulated, "you are all abroad. I am this lady's friend."

"Oh, gentlemen!" burst in Mrs. Stanard, "do not believe him. He is no friend of mine. I do not know him. I have never seen him before."

"Oh! What's your leetle game, stranger? You've got a gall, an' that's a fact. Do you expect to face the lady down, an' force her to acknowledge she knows you? Cheese it, stranger! Your cheek 'ud make a good target for a dynamite gun—it would so."

"Allow me one word! Mrs. Stanard, you surely know me. I am Max Rankin."

"I have come to befriend you, to stand by you, to defend you against the cruel slanders that have come so near blighting your life, if not even destroying it. The wicked plot against you has been discovered. Your innocence will soon be proclaimed and established beyond question."

"Oh, Mr. Rankin!" quavered the lady, advancing toward him as if yet half fearful that he might prove other than himself.

But the words he spoke, as well as his identity, finally penetrated her confusion; and clasping his hand in both her own, she drew close to him, as if for protection.

"But what has happened to you? You are wounded. You have been fighting your way to us? Ah!"

The last was a cry of terror. The failure of Vera to respond to her call recurred to her.

"My daughter!—my child! What has become of her? Oh, kindly gentlemen, some dreadful thing has happened! She has been torn from me! If you do not help me—if you do not find her for me, I shall die!"

"Vera—Miss Stanard!" stammered Rankin, turning paler than he already was.

"Oh! she has been stolen away, or murdered! They tried to do it the moment we entered this dreadful place. One brave gentleman alone defended us. But now she is gone. Oh, Vera! Vera!"

"Where is she?—where was she last?" cried Rankin, excitedly.

"In the room above. But I have called to her without avail."

Rankin did not stay for calling. At a bound he was up the stairs.

"A light! a light!" he shouted, finding himself plunged into impenetrable gloom.

It revealed nothing but an empty room and a disarranged bed.

There was no sign of violence. The open window alone suggested the avenue of exit.

Passing through this, out on to the roof, with the candle in his hand, Rankin slid down to the eaves, and thence dropped to the ground.

He discovered the imprints of heavy feet, which were evidence sufficient of abduction.

He followed the trail to where Vera had been smothered into silence with the blanket,

and put on horseback. Then he appealed to the crowd that had followed his movements with a dull, mechanical apathy which his vivid interest in the case prevented him from noticing.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "after traveling a thousand miles in pursuit of a dastardly villain, I have reached here just too late to prevent this outrage to which you are witnesses. I know that I shall not appeal in vain to the chivalry of the men of the border for aid in recovering the young lady who has been so cruelly abducted. I am no adept at such business as this; but I have no doubt there are those of your number who are competent to hunt this scoundrel down; and when it comes to fighting, I hope to make a fair showing. Will you make your own election as to leader, and let him select the necessary men?"

To his utter astonishment, the denizens of Murderer's Row stood round, and made no response.

"Have I made myself understood?" he asked, hesitatingly.

Then, with marked reluctance, looking about from face to face:

"I am willing to pay those who aid me, for their time and the peril they incur."

Then a representative man of the place spoke:

"Stranger, you're barkin' up the wrong tree. Better take yer gruel straight, an' say no more about it."

"Do I understand you, sir?" exclaimed Rankin, almost dumfounded.

"I can't say as to that. I never hyeared no complaint o' Dan Bolton's bazoo, fur gittin' down to hard pan. But we'll try ag'in, ef you say so."

"If you please."

"Waal, then, go to bed, an' sleep on it. In the mornin', things may look different."

And with his hands in his pockets he turned carelessly to leave the spot.

"But, gentlemen," appealed Rankin to the others, who seemed to remain only from idle curiosity, "you surely cannot mean to abandon me—the young lady, in her helplessness?"

"What Dan Bolton says, goes," answered one of the men.

"Oh, but this is infamous!" cried Rankin, almost beside himself with dismay and rage. "Gentlemen, I appeal to you—"

But the futility of it drove him to another recourse.

Hastening to the house, where Mrs. Stanard was moaning in despair, he took her by the hand and drew her forth.

"My dear Mrs. Stanard, an unheard of thing has happened. I cannot make it out. I seem to be doubted. Surely it is that. But they cannot listen to you so coldly. I need your voice added to mine, to appeal to these men."

"Where is George?" asked Mrs. Stanard. "I have not seen him. He will know what to do."

"Alas, my dear madam, he is the root of all your troubles!" replied the detective.

"What can you mean? I owe my escape to him—"

"And your previous imprisonment, dear Mrs. Stanard. Never was any one so cruelly deceived as you have been."

"By George? By my son? He is indeed a son to me. Surely, Mr. Rankin, this is a strange delusion."

She drew back coldly.

"What motive can you have for traducing him?"

"To save you, dear madam, believe me!"

"My son, whom you so strangely accuse, has been devoting himself to that end."

Then of a sudden she threw up her hands in despair.

"Ah, what has come upon me? Misery accumulates on misery! My husband, my child, and now this outrageous blow. Sir, whatever your scheme, you have made a wrong move in trying to undermine my confidence in the one person left to me. You shall be confronted with him, and brought to account for your conduct!"

"Oho! oho! oho!" cried Dan Bolton, whose affectation of going off to bed had been only a rhetorical flourish. "A leetle game, eh? The smooth-talkin' gent has an ax of his own to grind. Maybe he's standin' in with the detective. I reckon we'd better hitch on to him, an' put him

away fur safe keepin'. The King may like to look him over before he goes higher!"

And in a twinkling Max Rankin found himself once more threatened by the lowering crowd.

"Mrs. Stanard, surely you cannot turn against me? What infatuation has Gleason cast about you ali? Will you listen? I tell you, it is he who ruined your husband, caused you to be cast into prison, and then brought you off here into exile, away from all law that would protect you from his fiendish practices, to get your daughter hopelessly in his power, and bend her to his will."

"Oh, this is infamous!" cried the lady, in unutterable indignation. "Man, have you no soul? Do you not see me in anguish enough already?"

But she turned from him to the crowd, saying brokenly:

"Gentlemen, will some one of you kindly bring Mr. Gleason to me? He must be at the tavern, if indeed something has not happened to him. He ought to be here now!"

"We'll take care o' this gent, anyhow, ma'am," declared Bolton.

And in a moment Rankin found himself a prisoner, disarmed, and fast being bound.

Wildly he appealed to them, and then to Mrs. Stanard. Explanation was futile.

"Hold on hyar, boss. Enough's enough, an' too much is a plenty. Close that gap in your face, or we'll have to stop it fur you!"

"Ram his music down his throat!"

"Say, boys, what're we up out o' bed fur?"

"To take the night air!"

"Hain't we goin' to have no circus before we turn in? The gent's up to mischief. He'll be safer ef we hang him up whar his friends won't miss him."

And to his horror Max Rankin saw this idea take like wildfire in the prairie grass.

CHAPTER XVII.

TONY DOBSON TAKES A HAND.

BUT at this critical moment came an interruption the most astonishing Max Rankin had ever witnessed.

Tony Dobson had been found and restored to consciousness.

His skull was a good, substantial one, meant for rough usage; and though it was pretty sore as yet on the outside, it was soon in serviceable condition again on the inside.

He was led up just in time to see his friend menaced with summary lynching.

The sight of him was a gleam of hope to distracted Mrs. Stanard.

"Oh, sir!" she cried, springing forward, and seizing his hand, "you at least are left to me. I can trust you where every one else seems to have gone mad, or to have turned against me."

"Ma'am you kin tie to Tony Dobson—you kin so!"

"You will find Mr. Gleason for me, if he has not been foully dealt with? Fetch him to me, and I will never cease to bless you."

"Maybe so, ma'am. At any rate, I'll do my best to fetch him."

"And my child!—oh, they have torn her from me! It must be that monster again—Dan Dirk!"

"Oh, can she have fallen into his cruel hands?"

She was growing quite wild in her distraction.

"Don't you take on, ma'am," said the stage-driver, soothingly. "What kin be done shall be done. Keep yer heart up. I told the young lady as I'd stand by her till the last dog was hung; an' Tony Dobson never went back on his word yit."

Then he turned toward Max Rankin, who, ceasing the futile expostulation with his guards, was waiting for an opening to appeal to his recently formed friend.

"Have you any influence with these men?" he asked. "The strangest infatuation has seized upon everybody."

"Hark to that!" yelled a resentful citizen. "Will we swaller that kind o' stuff?"

"Boys," interposed Tony Dobson, in a tone which took his friend in charge, "ef you'll hark to me, the gent is off his base. He don't want your help fur nothin'. He happened to stumble up ag'in' a leetle diffikilty, which the same I did myself; an' he's light in the upper story yit."

"But," expostulated Rankin, in amazement.

"Thar ain't no buts in this hyar section—none what counts—only the butts o' revolvers. Will you hark to me, ef you please?"

The stage-driver coolly linked his arm through that of his friend—an action the effect of which was magical. Everybody fell back; and Rankin stood a free man.

"I've lived in this hyar section longer than you have, youngster," declared the stage-driver. "Hark to my bazoo. I don't shout often; but when I do shout, I shout loud."

"Gentlemen," he continued, turning to the crowd, "let us adjourn."

And to Rankin's utter amazement, the crowd seemed to drop all interest in the matter, save that of idle curiosity.

"We're at home hyar," declared Tony, standing in the doorway, with his face outward toward the gaping crowd. "We'll take care o' the lady. Her darter an' the other one has gone out fur a mite of a walk—fur their health, ye onderstand. Gents, we hope you'll sleep well."

And Tony coolly bowed them a dismissal. Only one man presumed to stand out against his unquestioned sway.

"Tony, do you take the responsibility o' this hyar thing?" asked Dan Bolton.

"I take the responsibility," answered the stage-driver.

"You know as the King don't stand no makin' nor meddlin' in what he sets his hand to."

"I'll see the King before you do. Nobody but myself ever had to shoulder my doin's yit. Don't you lose no sleep over the matter."

"You are all witness," concluded Bolton, "that I wash my hands o' the hull affair. I was fur law an' order; but Tony hyar holds over me."

Without further discussion the stage-driver stepped back into the room, and closed the door, shutting the gaping crowd on the outside.

He turned, to confront Max Rankin, who stared at him as if he thought him possessed of some power not altogether canny.

"Well! of all the cool gentlemen it has been my fortune to meet, I think you stand pre-eminent. What is your position in this town, that you can order its citizens about like that?"

"We'll talk that over after we've got the lady hyar—Ah!"

And springing past Rankin, the stage-driver caught Mrs. Stanard in his arms just in time to save her from an ugly fall on the floor.

Dismayed at the turn things had taken, as it appeared that the last man on whom she had rested any dependence was in collusion with Max Rankin, who seemed to be an enemy, the distracted lady had quietly lapsed into unconsciousness.

Tony placed her on the bed, and then turned again to Rankin.

"You stay hyar till I fetch a woman what'll do a heap better by her than the one she's got shut of; though, but fur your say-so, I'd swear by the leetle brogue slinger yit."

"Pardon my forgetfulness of this poor lady. I don't think my head is quite clear yet; and your control over those ruffians filled me with astonishment. But if you can get a good woman, though I have been so cruelly misjudged, I shall feel personally obliged to you—"

"No, you won't! What I do, I do fur the leetle woman I've sworn to stand by. I've had one look out of her eyes already. Whatever I kin do fur her, another like it will squar' the account."

"As you please. Don't be longer than is unavoidable."

"I'm off a-runnin'," declared Tony, and made good his word.

He soon returned with the woman, an honest creature worrying through life with a vagabond husband.

Mrs. Billings was rather more talkative than necessary, and given to the expression of tearful sympathy; but she soon had Mrs. Stanard as comfortable as possible in her trying situation.

While she was restoring the afflicted lady

to consciousness, Tony Dobson was elucidating matters for the puzzled Max Rankin.

"It looks to you queer that I should seem to run this ranch. Waal, ye see, me an' the boys is purty solid. I've lived among 'em, an' know how to take 'em; an' they know me."

"But, if they are your friends, why didn't you help me to enlist them in the task before us?"

"Because, as I told you, I know 'em."

"What do you 'low has become o' the young women as we looked to find here?"

"One of them may have left of her own accord. It is inconceivable that the other can have done so, too."

"What might have taken her away?"

"I believe she has been abducted—most probably with the aid of the woman I have warned you against."

"An' the feller as is king pin in the abduction?"

"Must be George Gleason—the man who has plotted so desperately against her and her mother."

"A hard case?"

"He is equal to anything. Since the discovery of his perfidy, I have unearthed his life. It has been iniquitous beyond description. The success of such reckless villainy is amazing."

"A knowin' chap, an' a bold one. Suppose he is standin' in with the boys o' the camp?"

"Of this place? Do you suppose he could corrupt a whole town?"

"They don't need much corruptin', to begin with. But he's got money; hain't he?"

"The proceeds of his robbery."

"Exactly. But all money goes. Now, then, ef he happened to have the boys bought up, have you got the rocks about you to outbid him?"

"N-no."

"Then the least said, the soonest mended. But now suppose he hasn't bought the boys up, an' they don't know no more about this matter than you or me. When you sprung the thing on 'em—Gents, a young lady has been run off with—I want you to help me git her back—what did you 'low as they'd be likely to do about it?"

"Why, I presumed that men, the world over, would come to the rescue of women."

"That's because, as I told ye, you don't know the Murderer's Rowites as well as I do."

"It appears that I was wrong. But their conduct is the most unaccountable experience of my life."

"They took it fur granted that Dan Dirk or some of his crowd had had a hand in the affair. Thar is special reason fur thinkin' as Dan himself is struck on the young lady."

"Well, what then?"

"They 'lowed as it wasn't a thing they'd want to meddle with, unless they sold you out to Dan."

"What!"

"Remember, Dan Dirk is the King o' No Man's Land."

"But do you mean to say that he would be allowed to perpetrate a most dastardly outrage on an innocent woman, when men—"

"I mean to say that he has his thumb on this hyar community. That's the hull story."

"An infamous one! But what is to be done?"

"We play our own cards the best we kin."

"You and I?"

"I'm with ye, my boy! Or, better yet, I'm with the young lady. I told her I'd stand by her while wood grew an' water run; an' I'm bound to do it."

"Give me your hand. I shall never forget—"

"It's what she furgits or remembers, pardner."

"Meanwhile your other duties?"

"I'll hunt up to sub. Ef the company don't like that, they kin lump it. I reckon they won't give Tony Dobson the grand bounce without stoppin' to think the matter over."

"Let us lose no time. Every moment counts. I am on the rack."

"Thar's the mother comin' round. Hark!"

Mrs. Stanard was calling for her daughter, in agonized tones as the fullness of the situation grew upon her.

Rankin, made more recognizable by the removal of the blood-stains, hastened to her bedside.

In the gentlest manner possible he urged his cause once more, going into all the details of the plot against her, and the means by which he had discovered it.

The lady seemed to listen to him, at first from sheer exhaustion; but gradually he gained her ear, as he marshaled detail after detail into line with telling force against the man she had trusted as a son.

She knew many things about Lightning George which her partiality had hitherto cloaked with indulgence. These dovetailed in with Rankin's story, supplying motives for deeds at which she shuddered as the account of them fell upon her ear.

In the end she lay quite broken.

"My child, my child! Oh, what has become of her?"

"We hope to recover her. If I leave you at once, it is that no time may be lost in going in search of her."

"Ah, if you will go. Go! Dear Mr. Rankin, I shall never forget—"

"I pray you, dear madam."

"Go!—go at once! All else counts as nothing. Give me my child back again."

"I go, dear Mrs. Stanard. Meanwhile, bear up."

"Go! go! You break my heart with the hope of her restoration."

The young man kissed the thin and tremulous hand he held with an emotion which the lady did not as yet clearly discern.

Then he addressed a hurried word of admonition to the nurse, and turned to Tony Dobson with his figure drawn erect, and that intense look in his eyes which had made the stage-driver pronounce him "a good one."

"Now for the beginning!"

"How be you 'lowin' to set out?"

"I propose to see this Dan Dirk. If he has anything to do with this business, he is the man we must cope with; if not, I shall endeavor to enlist him on our side. If he is King here, he can be of service to us."

"We'll talk the thing over as we go along," answered Tony Dobson, non-committally. "We'll want our hosses first, anyway."

So they left the house together.

They were scarcely beyond the range of hearing from Mrs. Stanard's shanty, when—

But, there! Some men are born lucky, some rich. Max Rankin's star must have been in obscurity.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LIGHTNING GEORGE'S BOLD VENTURE.

LIGHTNING GEORGE was a man who never lost his head.

The appearance of Max Rankin threatened to balk all his plans, by curtailing the time necessary to work upon a woman's feelings.

He believed that Rankin had not been foolhardy or impractical enough to come into that country on such an undertaking without backers.

One—the stage-driver, though Lightning George did not recognize him—he had found in his immediate company. Others, he thought, were following. This point he had the coolness to make sure of, before proceeding further.

Skulking about beyond the range of the light streaming from Mrs. Stanard's shanty, he was a witness to the interview between the citizens of Murderer's Row and the man who declared himself a detective, on the trail of a murderess in the person of Mrs. Stanard.

In Nivins, of Virginia City, Lightning George recognized a creature of his own—a straw man, devised for the purpose of playing upon the inexperience of Mrs. Stanard and her daughter.

George laughed heartily at the self-styled detective's performance, and the outcome of it, landing him, as it did, in quod.

But it was not to his purpose to let the peculiar ideas of law and order prevalent at Murderer's Row interfere with his plot; so he at once resolved upon effecting Mr. Nivins's rescue from the durance vile into which he had fallen.

But before this project was carried into

execution, another matter claimed his attention.

Max Rankin appeared on the scene, and after him Tony Dobson; and before long it was evident to Lightning George that Max had done the very thing of which he had supposed him incapable. But for the accidental enlistment of the stage-driver in his cause, Max would have stood absolutely alone.

"The fool!" declared Lightning George. "He ought to be bagged, for his folly, if for nothing else. He's altogether too innocent to live in this wicked world. Does he imagine that all men await his appeal to their manhood and honesty? The pocket is the fulcrum, and money the lever, by which the world is moved. I'll look out for Mr. Rankin, and when I get hold of him, teach him a valuable lesson—too late, however, for application in the present case."

A short, sharp run brought him to a band of men, grouped in silent waiting in the darkness. They had no horses with them. They were too near the camp to risk betrayal by a chance whinny.

"Boys," cried Lightning George, "the ball opens. I have work to your taste immediately."

"We're keen fur it, Cap," answered one of the men. "It's slow business suckin' yer thumbs in idleness like this hyar."

"Follow me at once and silently. We have a couple of birds to bag first, and then possibly warmer work cut out for us."

"The warmer, the better."

Though he could not be seen, the voice of the last speaker betrayed him as "yer own Uncle Ben." These were Dan Dirk's men, acting under Lightning George's orders by contract.

The Boy in Leather Breeches also was of the party, indeed was Lightning George's right-hand man, he having conceived a marked admiration for his conqueror.

Silently they stole into the camp, and surrounded Mrs. Stanard's shanty, at a safe distance.

They witnessed the return of Tony Dobson with the nurse. They were in readiness for the setting out of Rankin and the stage-driver in quest of the abducted girl.

The two had proceeded but a little distance, when they were warned of danger by hearing a signal hiss, like that of a snake.

It was followed by a vivid flash of light, which gave them an instantaneous vision well calculated to thrill them to the soul.

They had unwittingly walked into the midst of a body of men whose disposition toward them they could not know, though in their present situation all strangers might safely be set down as hostile.

They were not long left in suspense on this head, however. The illumination, produced by firing a quantity of loose powder, so that no explosion was produced, was only to show their enemies how to set upon them.

Tony Dobson was entangled in the noose of a lasso before he could draw a weapon, while Max Rankin was grappled by the Boy in Leather Breeches, and treated to a hug that was a new experience to him.

In this situation high courage could not avail him. He was not the athlete that Lightning George had proved himself to be! He fought a good fight, but was overcome in the end, and lay a captive, in despair.

"And this is the end of my champion-ship!" he groaned within himself. "Ah! this contemptible body of mine! I have been all my life cultivating my brain; and now, when all that life holds of value hangs on the issue, this hound, with his brute muscles, is my master! Oh, Vera, my darling I have failed you!"

It was the bitterest moment of his life.

But who were his captors? Had it been a deliberate ambush? and was he the chance victim of circumstances that bore no direct relation to him? In the latter event the case might not yet be hopeless.

"Gentlemen," he appealed to those nearest him, "who are you? What interest have you in detaining my companion and me?"

The men remained silent, to give Lightning George an opportunity to transact his own business in his own way. Lightning George did not answer at once, and Rankin went on:

"If you have no interest in my particu-

lar concerns, and money and a pledge of silence will be any inducement to you to release us—"

"Come! come!" ejaculated Lightning George, at last, "there is no use in letting this run on. Do you fancy that money will be a consideration with me, as an offset to your meddling?"

"George Gleason!" exclaimed Rankin. "No, I don't think it will."

"Very good. I am glad we understand each other so easily. What are you doing here?"

"Lying helpless, as your prisoner—for what offense, you probably know as well as I do."

"All right. I am willing to let it go at that. I have no need of information from you. If I had, I should find a way to squeeze it out of you."

"I have no doubt."

"Come, boys! Now for the next pull. Put these fellows in safe keeping. Two will be guard enough. Keep them moving toward the rendezvous. And now for some music 'as is music'."

Securely bound, Max Rankin and the stage-driver were marched off, while Lightning George was followed by the rest of his men toward the center of the camp.

Meanwhile the place had quieted down. It took something unusually lively to keep Murderer's Row out of bed when there was no lay-out running.

Through the darkness crept Lightning George and his party, till they came to the shanty in which Nivins of Virginia City was confined.

All within the shanty and about it was as dark and still as a graveyard.

"They must 'a' tied him up, an' left him thar to roost alone like a last chick in the coop," observed the Boy in Leather Breeches.

"We'll soon settle that," answered Lightning George.

He moved noiselessly up to the shanty, and tried the door.

"The thing is fastened," he whispered.

Putting his lips to the crack of the door, Lightning George whispered:

"Nivins!"

He was not a little surprised by the response this summons elicited.

In a voice quite different from what he expected, he got his answer:

"Cheese it, boys. I knowed you'd be like to come; an' I've got a leetle army in hyar to stand ye off with. I don't want to hurt none o' my respected feller-citizens; but when Brad Turner is sot over a prisoner, you bet it'll take a powerful lot o' lynchers to straddle his blind. Be you at the head of that movement, Dan?"

"It's Bully Brad!" whispered the Boy in Leather Breeches. "Ye might as well buck up ag'in' a stone wall, as ag'in' Bully Brad Turner."

"H'st!" admonished Lightning George.

And moving away without betraying his identity to the men on guard, he drew his men after him.

"Ha! ha! ha!" chuckled Bully Brad. "Stood 'em off that time. I reckon I'm buildin' up somethin' of a repertation in this hyar community. But I didn't 'low as they'd let go so easy."

He should have followed Lightning George, had he wished to learn a thing or two.

"Well, gentlemen," said that worthy to his followers, when he had them out of ear-shot from the "jug," "what do you think of the situation?"

"Ef you'll allow me to speak, on the principle of age before beauty," observed Uncle Ben, "I should say as a drink all round would be more comfortin' to the inner man than a bout with Bully Brad. I know him of old; an' he's a tough customer."

"What have you to say?" asked George of the Boy in Leather Breeches.

"Waal, that depends," he answered, non-committally. "Ef it was me now, I'd cave. I'm free to say that. But then, I ain't Lightning George—I know that well enough."

"If you were?"

"Waal, my repertation might be worth somethin'."

"Am I to take that as a suggestion?"

"It don't cost ye nothin', boss. A man don't have to take a gift hoss, ef he don't think he's worth his feed."

"Well, I have a better reason for concluding to disregard Bully Brad's stand-off. I have retreated only to make sure how many I can count on. If there are any weak knees in this party, now is the time to crawl. I have a way of shooting a man who goes back on me in a critical moment. However, I do not feel justified in proceeding to such lengths, unless he has voluntarily bound himself to stand to the mark. I propose to double your pay, if we get that prisoner out of the jug. Who is with me? Don't speak till you have fully made up your minds."

But there was no one there who would hesitate with such a leader. One and all stood their ground.

"Very well," said Lightning George. "What we want is a battering-ram. If we are to accomplish anything, the work must be done quickly and effectively. A minute's delay will bring the whole camp about our ears."

"To begin with, our horses must be brought closer in to camp. We must be ready to jump out of the hornets' nest at once, when we have stirred it up."

Dividing his party, he sent some in quest of the horses, others for an effective piece of timber to be used as a battering-ram, himself going to reconnoiter the vicinity of the shanty in which the prisoner was confined, and to capture any scout that Bully Brad might send out, for the purpose of learning the movements of the supposed lynchers, or for reinforcements.

It was necessary that the capture of the scout, if any was sent forth, should be so silent that Bully Brad would have no intimation of it. Otherwise he might raise a general disturbance, and so bring the sleeping camp to his aid. If he could keep his prisoner without this general alarm, of course it would be a matter of pride with him to do so.

Counting on this, Lightning George skulked about till, sure enough, he espied a dusky figure issuing from the shanty.

"Now, boys," he whispered, "let me take charge of this gentleman. You be on the look-out for any one else."

Instead of attempting his capture at once, Lightning George followed the scout, with such delicacy that he himself was not discovered.

The fellow moved about with great caution, stopping for long intervals of listening. George stalked him with as great patience as a hunter of men ever observed.

Further and further he got away from the shanty; and with every enlargement of his field of inspection, he became bolder.

At last he concluded that the lynchers had abandoned their enterprise, and quietly gone "to roost," to avoid the humiliation of being identified as men whom Bully Brad had so easily stood off.

He was walking quite freely, covering all the field Bully Brad had enjoined him to inspect, when he passed a point where Lightning George had anticipated him.

He received a blow on the head that sent him to grass without a murmur.

Lightning George coolly lifted the inert body of the scout on his stout shoulder, and carried it to where a party of his men were in waiting.

"Take care that he does not croak," was his short command. "Give me his hat and outer garments."

"Boss," interposed the Boy in Leather Breeches, "you ain't goin' in thar?"

"What is the reason I ain't?"

"Why, Bully Brad'll slaughter ye, ef he suspicions ye the least mite."

"That's his privilege. When I go to war, I take all the chances of war."

"But sich chances as this hyar! It's a dead sure thing!"

"Oh, no."

"But I say—no offense!—oh, yer! Don't you 'low as thar's a countersign, to begin with?"

"I should fancy so. They would naturally be delicate about letting anybody in there who happened to apply."

"Waal, then?"

"I'll look out for the countersign. Fetch that fellow to."

"Whisky did it," as it has done many another worse thing.

"Now, my man," said Lightning George,

stationing himself squarely before the prisoner, "do you know who scooped you in?"

"How should I?" asked the scout, rubbing the sore spot on his head.

"You at least know the means."

"A crack on the knowledge-box. I'm not likely to furtit it fur a while."

"But what you probably do not know is, the fact that I saw you come out of the bull-pen, and tracked you steadily till I felt like taking you in. I thought it easier to let you walk to where I wanted you, than to have to pack you on my back."

"Is that so, boss?"

"That's so. And now, do you know who I am?"

"I know you're the lightning sharp what got away with—Waal, boss, suppose we don't say no more about that?"

"You have said enough to convince me that you do not need to be told that when I talk, I talk business."

"I'd know that, Cap, by the look of you."

"Well, then, what is the countersign you received from Bully Brad?"

The scout hesitated.

"My time is short," hinted Lightning George, with no menace in tone or movement.

"Pard, they'll hang me up to dry!" pleaded the wretched scout.

"I'll get you ready, if you keep me waiting," answered Lightning George.

The man read his face a moment, interpreted aright its cold-blooded impassivity, and answered without further hesitation:

"A bully stand off."

"What is your name?"

"Jess Ford."

"Who are your friends, in that shanty? The men likely to speak to you, I mean?"

"Matty Brisbane is the most like, I reckon."

"Is there anything in particular that you are both interested in, that I should be likely to blunder over, if I did not know it?"

"No. Then thar's Brad himself. He might bone me to trade fur a pack o' cards what I've got an' he wants."

"Let me have them."

Thus equipped, Lightning George went to venture into the enemy's camp.

His last charge was:

"Boys, you play the very deuce with that door till you hear from me. Then you make tracks as fast as you've a mind to."

Everything was in readiness. The shanty was surrounded. Every man was at the post Lightning George had assigned him, and understood his duty perfectly.

At the last moment the Boy in Leather Breeches detained his chief anxiously.

"Ain't thar no other way, boss?" he asked.

"What ef we don't cave that door in before the camp's up? It'll be sure death fur you, in thar."

"That is the very reason I am going in," answered Lightning George.

"Because it's sure death?"

"No. Because I am afraid the door won't give way before we are driven off."

"But then—"

"I am determined to have my man. I need him, and I need him bad. I am willing to risk my life to get him. More than that, I never go back on a man who belongs to me."

"But how'll you git him, ef we don't cave the door in so's you kin git out yourself?"

"Wait, and you'll see."

And gratefully wringing the hand of the man who was so plainly anxious for his safety, Lightning George crept forward, and presented himself for admittance to the "bull-pen."

"Who's hyar?" was the cautious demand.

"A bully stand-off!" he responded.

The door was opened, and he glided in. Would he ever come forth alive?

What the men he left behind remembered was, that he never went back on a man who belonged to him!

CHAPTER XIX.

IN A PRETTY TRAP.

When Lightning George had entered the bull-pen, and the door was closed, shutting him in, he found himself in a situation that would have tried the nerves of most men.

The narrow room literally swarmed with men, whom he could hear breathing all about

him, though nothing was visible in that Stygian darkness.

The discovery of his treachery meant lynching, even if they did not tear him to pieces before letting him out of those four walls.

There was but one thing in his favor—all were confined to whispers, as they did not wish to betray to the outsiders how many they had in wait for them.

"It'll be a surprise party," Bully Brad had said; "an' that's our best holt."

What he was after, was to make a reputation, by doing something that would be talked about.

"Waal, Jess," he asked, as soon as Lightning George was within, "what news?"

"Pard," answered Lightning George, in a whisper, "they ain't done yit, you bet!"

"They ain't, eh? So much the better."

And Brad could be heard rubbing his hands in self-gratulation.

This silent stand-off would be nothing to boast of. It would be believed that the lynching party had been too small to effect anything. What Brad wanted was a fight.

"Did you git onto any o' their plannin'?" he asked.

"No."

"Oh, blast yer eyes! what did you come sneakin' back hyar fur, then? Didn't I send you out to find out somethin'?"

"Don't bite yer terbacker off till you're sure you've got a full chew, boss," advised Lightning George, with an affectation of surliness.

"Blast ye! what do you mean?" demanded Brad, as loud as he dared to speak.

"I mean that I know my duty, an' I gin-erally do it."

"You don't seem to have knowed much this trip, nor done much, nuther."

"You hain't gi' me a show."

"I'll give you all the show ye want, then. Take yer own time."

"I don't want much. It's jest this hyar way. The boys is skulkin' all about the camp—gittin' reinforcements, it looked to me. I'd drop to a slittin'shadder hyar, an' another slittin' shadder thar—touch an' go, an' say nothin'. One of 'em was on to me before I knowed it."

"All right," says he. "Git back to the bull-pen. They're all comin' in!"

"That's all he said, an' I says jest 'All right,' an' no more."

"Then I see that the boys was comin' back. I 'lowed as you'd want ter know it before it went much further; so hyar I be. You know now what you're kickin' ag'in'. All the solid men o' the camp, I reckon. They don't none 'o 'em have much stomach fur detectives."

"No more do I," said Brad, rather slowly.

Then he rallied, and went on pugnaciously:

"But when I'm sot over a man, thar I 'low to stay till the last dog's hung. Ef thar's enough men in this hyar camp to pull me off the perch, the sooner I know it the better. Let 'em come on!"

"But, hold on, boys, I ain't only talkin' fur one. Maybe ye don't all feel about it as I do. Ef thar's ary one hyar what 'ud druther be on the outside when the circus begins, than on the inside, let him speak now, or forever after hold his peace. Don't be bashful, boys. I kin roost hyar alone, ef it comes to that."

There is nothing so contagious as courage. One bold man will make a score of heroes. It is partly generous emulation; and that is to be commended. It is partly also a matter of vanity. Few men have the hardihood to crawl when one of their fellows proposes to stand to the rack.

"What's the word?" insisted Bully Brad, as silence prevailed about him. "Hand in yer resignations, an' we pass you on the outside, one by one."

"I reckon thar ain't none o' that kind in hyar," ventured Natty Nutter. "I had the pickin' of most of 'em myself; an' I 'low as I know my men."

That of itself strengthened the weak-kneed, if there were any such. A general murmur confirmed Nutter's estimate of the quality of his men, and the thing was settled.

"Say, Brad," now queried Lightning George, "how about the prisoner?"

"What's the row with him?"

"Suppose they cave in our defenses?"

"We'll stick to him all the same."

"Of course we will. But it may be necessary to run him off. Ef we could git him off out o' sich a scrape as that, ye know Dan 'ud give a leetle somethin' to the plucky man."

"Why would he? What's he got to do with it?"

"Didn't you drop to this snoozer? He said he was after the pretty one's mother."

"That's so."

"Waal, won't he be worth somethin' to Dan, then?"

"He might, fur a fact."

"You bet! Say, look hyar. I've got a proposition to make to you."

"Spit it out."

"I'll be easy with ye about them keerds, ef you'll put me on to the job."

"Oh, yes, ye will! That's one sweet bargain! How much do you low as you'd be makin' out of it?"

"Half an' half—share an' share alike. Do you reckon I'm the fool to offer you the keerds alone fur the show with Dan? I ain't no hog, I ain't."

"Oh, waal, that looks better."

"You'd orer see that without tellin'."

"I see it now, an' see it big."

"Is it a go?"

"You bet."

"Put my hand on the man. The boys 'll want your word fur it."

"I'll fix that."

This conference had been held in private, Lightning George started it so low that no one but the one for whom it was intended was allowed to hear it.

Brad now raised his voice.

"You have done better'n I 'lowed, Jess," he said. "Step this hyar way. I reckon you'll do to stand by the prisoner. Ef I use a man rough unbeknownst, I always make it up to him when I git the straight o' things. But the more I put on you, the stiffer you've got to stand up under it. I want you to hang on to this man till the last dog's hung. Ef you fail me, I'll take it out o' your hide. Don't take the job, ef you don't want the responsibility. Thar's a heap o' jest as good men as you be hyar, what 'll jump at the chance."

"You try me on," answered the pseudo Jess. "Ef you hadn't 'lowed as I counted fur somethin', you wouldn't 'a' sent me out yan."

"That's a fact," admitted Brad. "Waal, you roost on this hyar chap. Freeze to him. Ef the boys caves us in, you pack him out o' that winder, an' make fur the bresh."

"Say, you detective feller, do you know as it's your neck we're tryin' to save?"

"Of course I do," answered Nivins.

"Waal, I reckon, then, you'll know enough not to hang back when the time comes. You hain't nothin' to hope fur from the chaps what is anxious to git in hyar an' thar's a fact. But, look you, my man—ef you try to cut stick, an' shake yer friends—that's us—you'll git bored!"

"No doubt. Very well; I won't try to escape, unless I see a fair chance to do so without getting bored by my friends."

"You've got a clipper bazoo; hain't ye? Waal, I hain't nothin' ag'in' that. Ef you see yer show, go in."

"Trust me! There are friends and friends, you know."

Lightning George put his hand on the prisoner, slipping it along his arm till he got hold of his hand.

Then he gave him a certain kind of a grip.

There was a violent start on Nivins's part, after which he lay still.

"He's afraid that was by accident," chuckled Lightning George to himself.

He repeated the signal, and had it joyfully returned.

Nivins knew, not only that he had a friend in camp, but who that friend was. He had run with Lightning George long enough to know his resources; and from that moment he felt very well assured of his ultimate escape—barring, of course, the chances of so desperate a situation, where nobody was really safe.

In a moment he was free of his bonds, and had a brace of revolvers thrust into his hands.

They were Jess Ford's equipment, which

Lightning George had confiscated as contraband of war.

While passing them to him, Lightning George put his lips to the prisoner's ear, and whispered a string of instructions to him.

In that desperate situation, it was necessary that they act in concert.

Nivins gathered himself up, so as to be ready for instant action. His abilities, which he had not yet had a chance to exhibit, were well known to his employer. In his years of riotous living in the City of the Golden Gate, Lightning George had had opportunity to gather about him a lot of effective tools.

"Say, Brad!" he called, in a hoarse whisper, as if this thought had just occurred to him, "how about this winder?"

"What's the matter with the winder?"

"How's it fastened? I may want to git it open when thar won't be no time fur experimentin'."

"Thar's a bar on the inside, an' another on the outside. You know as well as I do, that this hyar place is fur keepin' men in, or keepin' 'em out, accordin' to circumstances."

"That's so. But I never reckoned on bein' inside, an' wantin' to git out, or on bein' outside, an' wantin' to git in; so I've give the thing the go-by. But it'll be one sweet situation, ef they happen to take the notion to slip the outside bar on us. Reckon I'll look after it before the ball opens."

"While you're about it, see ef you kin spot anybody out that way."

"All right."

Lightning George cautiously removed the bar, and opened the stout oaken shutter, which swung outward.

To his dismay, when he thrust his head through the opening, as if to carry out Brad's instructions, he brought it into a bar of light streaming from a neighboring shanty.

Some one astir at that uncanny hour had set his candle before his window, where its beams cast a fatal illumination on the countenance of the man who dared so much rather than go back on a man who belonged to him.

"Hello!" ejaculated a voice at his elbow.

"Who's this hyar? Not—"

The speaker got no further.

He found himself in the iron grip of the man whose disguise he had penetrated, while his legs were seized by Nivins, who sprung to the aid of his principal without waiting for a summons.

A mighty boost; and the discoverer was shot bodily through the window, to land on his head on the outside.

"Hello! What the deuce is that?" exclaimed Brad Turner, speaking aloud in his astonishment.

"The prisoner has bolted!" declared one who stood near.

With a burst of savage execration, Bully Brad began to shoulder his way toward the spot, bent on wreaking instant vengeance on the man who had so flagrantly failed of the trust reposed in him.

"Nary prisoner!" insisted Lightning George. "I've got my grip on him."

"Shoot the next man what goes through that winder!" ordered Bully Brad. "We'll have one of 'em, any way."

"Cap," cried a man who had made the same discovery with him who had so quickly paid the penalty of his unwelcome penetration, "this hyar ain't Jess Ford, no more'n I be. We're betrayed. It's a spy!"

"Down him! down him!" rose the cry.

Now all caution was cast to the winds. Everybody shouted with free lungs. What was the use of longer trying to hide their numbers from the lynchers, if they had thus succeeded in penetrating to their very midst?

"Hold on, gentlemen!" ejaculated Nivins, making a desperate effort to retrieve the situation, the retreat through the window being now quite as desperate a hazard as to remain where they were. "Don't salt me. I've nothing to do with this. And don't forget that this is one of your own townsmen, whoever he may be."

"The own townsmen what steals into my camp, as a spy, has got to look out fur himself!" declared Brad, who was rapidly shouldering his way through the crowd.

"Reach fur him, boys! No! Hold on! Leave him fur me."

But, though Bully Brad's men might be willing to leave him to his own revenge, it was no part of Lightning George's plan to let them wait in idleness.

Nivins, as we have said, had already had his instructions; and the two went to work beautifully in concert.

The nearest man was seized, and shot through the window as neatly as the first had been.

His passage, however, was not so uneventful. Half a dozen revolvers flashed, filling the room with little holes burnt in the darkness; and as many bullets followed him at a much greater speed than he himself was making—considerably to the detriment of his skin!

By this time Bully Brad was on the spot.

A man was deftly thrust into his arms so as to seem to be an assailant; and as the enraged Brad immediately "went for" his life, the fellow had to make a desperate fight to save himself.

In less time than it would take to tell it, the room was turned into a pandemonium. Nobody could tell friend from enemy in that rayless gloom; and the prospect of a free fight, in which the prisoners would fare best of all, was very promising indeed.

As if to add to the confusion, at that instant came the boom of the battering-ram. The place was assaulted from without, as well as betrayed within.

Boom, crash, bang! went the ram, as rapidly as the assailants could retreat and charge. The house was shaken to its foundations. But the stout oak and the heavy iron held fast. The bull-pen at Murderer's Row had been built to stand.

"A light!—strike a light!" shouted some one within. "We're only knockin' the day-lights out o' one another. Light a match, somebody."

A match was scraped; but a hand of iron closed upon the flame, and the scraper of it found himself sailing through the air, out of the window.

"Thar he goes! They're jumpin' out!" yelled a voice.

And again the revolvers spoke.

"Thar goes another one! Salt 'em! salt 'em!"

"Come hyar, somebody! This batterin'-ram has got to be stopped. They'll be in on us in a minute."

"Hold on, fellers! Them men goin' through the winder is our own. We're shootin' our own men."

"Blaze away at the breast level. We'll soon stop that fun."

"No! no! We'll kill two of our men to one o' them. Don't furgit that Bully Brad is hyar."

This appeal came from a man who thought he was in personal danger in case of fusillade in that direction.

The moment for which Lightning George had waited, and toward which all his efforts thus far had been tending, was now arrived.

He had supposed that one man might pass through the window safely; but he had also known that the second would probably be riddled with bullets. As it was a rule with him never to take the better chance while a subordinate had to come after, that second man would be himself. With no relish for playing target when it was avoidable, he had sought to throw his enemies into confusion, so that he as well as the man he had come to rescue might take advantage of their uncertainty, and escape.

He now uttered a signal for Nivins to attempt the window.

It came a moment too late. One of the men whom they had thrown through the aperture had landed all right; and scrambling to his feet, he now turned the tables on them, by slamming to the shutter, and fastening it on the outside.

They were prisoners in that den of wolves!

CHAPTER XX.

DAN DIRK'S PREDICAMENT.

It will be remembered that, before joining Mrs. Stanard, Julia Winters spent one night at Murderer's Row in the company of one of its most indefatigable mews-mongers.

What she there learned of Dan Dirk's re-

lation to Vera Stanard gave shape to her opinions and purposes, now that the worst she had feared had come to pass.

Her one mistake in reasoning out the situation, was the supposition that Dan Dirk must be aware whom he was abducting; whence she conceived the idea that he might have concluded to steal Vera on his own account; or, if not yet, that he might be induced to so betray his employer's interests.

To this end she rushed forth into the night to seek him.

Her transformation of character had consumed scarcely more than five minutes.

During that interval Dan Dirk had made good his escape with his captive; Lightning George had had his encounter with Rankin and the stage-driver; and the detective had closed the gap between himself and the man he was so anxious not to lose.

Not hoping to overtake and join Dan Dirk, it was Julia's purpose to secure a horse by hook or by crook, and follow him to his retreat, of the location of which she had carefully apprised herself.

Attracted by Mrs. Stanard's shriek at sight of Julia in her male disguise, the detective ran toward the house. At the same time Julia made her way toward the Jack Pot, carefully evading those who were turning out to the "doin's," till she discovered the horses which Rankin and Tony had ridden, standing before the now deserted tavern.

Boldly appropriating one of them, she rode him out of the camp undetected, while the citizens were holding their interview with Nivins of Virginia City, and receiving their cool dismissal from the stage-driver.

Once clear of the camp, she rode at top speed in the wake of the fleeing outlaws.

Dan Dirk feared no pursuit; so he did not urge his men to any great expedition.

However, he had that within him which would not let him rest. Conscience or what-not, he was a prey to a most furious conflict of emotions.

He had sought to banish the reproachful phantom of the woman whose loveliness and purity had set him at war with himself, by perpetrating an outrage upon one of her sex, careless who the victim might be, and never dreaming that it could be the girl herself. He supposed that she had continued her journey with her mother, disgusted with Murderer's Row. The conflict in his soul had kept him from revisiting the Row meanwhile; so he had not learned of their enforced return.

He had no curiosity as to Lightning George's victim. He did not care to so much as look at her. Indeed, the infamy accomplished, he dreaded to meet her piteous eye, or the dumb appeal of her white face, lest it assume the lineaments of the woman he loved, by a trick of his imagination, and haunt him the more.

In a paroxysm of rage and despair, he turned her over entirely to Tom Curtin, and dashed away by himself, to fight again the demons of remorse.

"There will be no escape but suicide!" he cried aloud to the night, as he sped along at a breakneck pace, half hoping that his horse might throw him to his death. "I've got to extricate myself, but sink me deeper in this hell of horror! Shall I never be free of her?"

Tossing his hat from his burning temple, he beat his head with his hands, crying out in his fury and pain. The rush of the cold night air through his hair was something of a physical relief, where no spiritual one was possible.

So he tore his coat and shirt off his burning breast. It seemed to him as if his heart were on fire.

During this soul conflict, Julia Winters was gaining upon the abductors, till she heard the tramp of their horses, and feared that she would betray herself prematurely.

Indeed she was discovered, but was supposed to be Dan Dirk following in the privacy of solitude, to hide the throes of passion to which his men had discovered he was subject.

"The Cap's gittin' maggots on the brain," observed Tom Curtin to the Boy in Leather Breeches, who rode beside him.

"We have as good cause as him to feel sore about that greased lightnin' sharp," an-

swered the other, with more of a disposition to laugh, however, over his misadventure. "How do you feel about that thar, ole man? How did Cap look when he see you in chancery?"

Nobody knew of Tom's greatest humiliation—the having his weapons returned to him in the presence of his superior. That he had kept to himself, throughout the running fire of chaff to which he had been subjected by his mates.

More than once he had manifested a disposition to vent his fury on some one tormentor; but by a sort of tacit arrangement the men all stood by one another; and he found that he would have to swallow his gruel, as they put it, straight, or fight the camp in a body.

He now answered the Boy in Leather Breeches sourly:

"When you think you've got enough o' that thar thing, I reckon you'll let up on it."

"Oh, I'm in the boat myself. Only I 'low as we'd orter take the thing good-natured. I ain't no better'n my cap'n, I ain't; an' the Left Duke he can't crow over me yit; so I'm solid."

"How's the Duke comin' on?"

"Oh, he's pullin' out of it, but takin' his time."

"I hyeard he'd got a bad crick in his back."

"You bet! What did Jack Babbet tell us at the outset? That's Lightnin' George, says he. We got what we got by not harkin' to him. Let him alone, says he; an' we went fur 'im."

"Blame fools!" growled Curtin.

"Better luck next time," laughed the Boy in Leather Breeches cheerfully.

Meanwhile Vera Stanard lay still unconscious in Tom Curtin's arms.

To his powerful muscles that limp burden was nothing. He did not trouble himself to rouse her till they reached the Retreat.

There he turned her over to one of the women—one, by the way, who had had her destiny fixed by a similar act of violence, but who had reconciled herself to it with no great difficulty.

Riding up to one of the shanties, he shouted:

"Hallo, Selina!"

"What's wantin'?" came the sleepy response.

"I've got a gal out hyar fur ye to take keer of."

"All right. Why don't ye fetch her in, without makin' such a row about it?"

"You're blame keerful o' your outlay o' muscle, you be," growled Curtin, proceeding to dismount.

"Take some o' that to yerself," retorted the woman.

Curtin kicked open the door, which the hostess had not deigned to rise to open, and crossed the threshold into the darkened room.

"Hyar she is. What shall I do with her?" he asked, addressing the invisible lady of the house.

"Pack her in hyar anywheres. Thar's room fur both of us, I reckon."

And in response Tom Curtin went groping across the room toward a corner where a rustling sound indicated some one moving over against the wall to make room for another occupant of her bunk.

"Waal, fur unadulterated laziness, you take the cake," growled Curtin.

"You drop yer load, an' clear out," retorted the woman, carelessly. "What's she like?"

"I don't know."

"Cap's?"

"No."

"Yours? But what do you fetch her hyar fur?"

"Because I'm ordered to."

"Then she ain't yours neither."

"Who said she was? Nobody but you. You're too handy with that red rag o' yourn."

"You mosey! Vamose the ranch! I'm tired o' listenin' to ye."

"Waal, you're a sassy doxie, anyway," laughed Curtin, turning to go.

"I'd have to be, to chin with a brute like you," was the parting shot he got.

So it happened that Dan Dirk's right lower was as ignorant as his master of the identity of their captive.

And this was the place in which Vera Stanard returned to consciousness.

Her head being placed low, so that the blood could return to the brain, she was not long in coming to herself.

She heard some one snoring beside her, and was almost at the same time informed, by the different odor of the place, that she was not in her own bed—even the poor affair at Murderer's Row.

To bound out of that hurrah's-nest was the work of an instant, her one comfort being the discovery that she was full dressed.

"Ah! where am I?" she cried, groping blindly about the room for some place of exit.

The sleeper left off snoring with a gulp, turned over, and expostulated:

"Oh, cheese it, my dear, do! What are you rowing about?"

It was a woman's voice, though not particularly prepossessing. But this was something.

"Who are you?" quavered Vera, piteously. "Where am I? How did I come here?"

"That'll keep till morning. Am I to get no sleep? Come to bed. You won't better matters by annoying me—I can promise you that."

"This was vixenish. The woman, without being particularly ill-natured, could evidently slap back.

By this time memory returned to the captive. She recalled the terrible visitation of her unknown abductor, and that last moment, when the thought of her mother's suffering tore from her breast the shriek that fear had locked within it; and then the muffler, and the horrible sense of suffocation.

"But what terrible place is this?" she petitioned. "What is to be done to me here? And what will mamma do when she discovers my absence?"

"She'll cry. That's an answer to one of your questions. Now will you stop teasing, and come back to bed? If you don't care to sleep, I do."

"Oh, but you are a woman, like myself. You cannot leave me in this dreadful suspense. Tell me—who are you? what is this place? what have they brought me here for?"

"Good Lord!" sighed the disturbed sleeper. "I suppose I might as well quiet you as to try to stand you off. To begin with, I don't know anything about you or your concerns."

"But why am I here with you, then?"

"Because you have been dropped on my hands—worse luck to the brute that brought you!"

"Who brought me?"

"Tom Curtin."

"And who is Tom Curtin?"

"The King's right bower."

"I don't think I quite understand you."

"Dan Dirk's right-hand man. Is that plain enough?"

"Ah! Dan Dirk!"

"A darling, ain't he? Say, you must be a corker to catch him. He's always been mighty hard to suit. I've a mind to git up an' strike a light, just to git a look at you."

"Oh, if you would strike a light!"

"Heighol this hyar's a blamed uncomfortable world!" groaned the sleepy woman.

With many a lazy sigh, she rose, and much fumbling for matches that somehow eluded her search, and a running fire of comment on the adjustment of everything in this exasperating world for her especial annoyance, she finally lighted a tallow dip, and then turned to inspect her involuntary and unwelcome guest.

She did not attempt to disguise her astonishment at the unexpected appearance of her prisoner. It was Vera's cultivated voice that had decided her to overcome her innate laziness and satisfy her growing curiosity.

"Waal!" she declared, with blunt frankness, "I always did say that Dan Dirk was a gentleman an' a man of taste. But whar on earth did he find you?"

Vera was shocked beyond expression.

"Am I to be the victim of that brute?" she cried, shuddering at the recollection of Tom Curtin's covetous eyes, and the ruthlessness of his clutch.

"You'd better thank your lucky stars you don't fall to the lot of Tom Curtin," replied the other. "Now, thar is a brute for you."

I've had the pleasure of slapping his face myself."

"Oh, but you can help me to escape!" cried Vera, suddenly losing her courage.

And springing forward, she cast herself at the feet of her guardian.

"Oh, if you have a heart, you cannot stand idly by and see me exposed to this horror! Pity me! pity me!"

The agonized look in the girl's eyes may have recalled some moment in her own life. The woman gazed at her with a momentary thrill of sympathetic feeling.

But recovering her wonted carelessness with a laugh, she said:

"Oh, you'll git used to it. It comes hard just at first; but the boys ain't half so bad as you'd think, when you come to know 'em. Most men are brutes. What difference does it make what particular one keeps you to fag for him. I've got so I take things easy. It's a mighty good man that kin shine around me. They've planted the only one that was ever fit to stand in shoe-leather. He *was* a corker. I didn't grudge to knuckle to him, though I made it warm for even him as long as it seemed to pay. He stuck to me, as he stuck to everything else he put his hand to; and in the end I had to own up I thought him middlin' fine. He's gone up now. I'll never see his match again. You might have heard of him—Jim Marcy—Gentle Jim, they called him, because none of 'em but wilted under his b'ar-hug.

"Thar's a good man they're all talkin' about now. Do you happen to know him? Lightnin' George. I'll bet my Jim would take the lightnin' out of him. He might git away with the Left Duke; but the Duke was nowhar to Jim."

In vain did Vera appeal to her womanly sympathy.

"Dan'll treat ye well," was her ultimatum.

She discarded Tom Curtin's denial that the captive was for their chief. She did not believe that Dan would let such a prize slip through his fingers.

Her curiosity gratified, she was about to go back to bed, leaving Vera to sob away the night in unspeakable wretchedness, when heavy trends approached the house, and a summary knock called her to the duties of a hostess.

Selina made herself presentable in a slipshod way, and opened the door; while Vera Stanard shrunk into a corner furthest from the reluctant tallow dip, quivering with dread.

Dan Dirk crossed the threshold, and stood in the presence of his captive, dumb with amazement as he recognized upon whom he had perpetrated that outrage.

CHAPTER XXI.

DAN DIRK RUNS TO COVER.

DAN DIRK was a man of some good impulses, sadly perverted by a vicious life.

He did not like to see suffering, especially in a person who happened to interest him. But when his selfish appetites pressed for gratification, he was capable of deeds of wanton cruelty, especially upon a person who did *not* happen to interest him.

Vera Stanard, by her gentleness and purity, had called up all the best of his nature; and the good and bad in him swung, now this way, now that, as stout wrestlers alternately gaining the advantage.

As is not unusual with natures of this kind, Dan was apt to add to his own torment, by hugging the thorn that stung him.

He had no notion of receding from the cruel project to which he had lent himself; yet the impulse seized him to look in upon his wretched victim, and see if she took it much to heart.

This is what brought him to Selina's shanty, and stood him face to face with the last woman in the world he would have confronted in that relation.

In blank dismay he stared at her.

For a moment she stared at him breathlessly. Then she looked over his shoulder, at another who was following him—no less a person than his Right Bower, Tom Curtin.

"Oh, Mr. Stilwell!" she cried, springing toward Dan with a sudden rebound of feeling from the sinking terror with which she had awaited the approach of the ruffian she feared. "You here?"

She had him by the hand, and was fond-

ling it, between hysterical laughter and tears.

Her absolute misapprehension gave Dan his cue.

The hand of iron that seemed to have closed about his heart relaxed; and in broken tones he answered her:

"A prisoner, like yourself."

"Oh!" she cried, gazing at him with sorrowful self-reproach. "And for defending me! I feared the result. I shall never forgive myself."

"Say no more in that vein," he replied. "My defense of you is the happiest recollection of my life—almost the only truly good deed."

Then he turned upon Tom Curtin, whose accompanying him was almost a pure accident, and entirely without a view to such a contingency.

"So this is what you brought me to, is it?" he demanded. "I knew it was some deviltry. Well, your revenge is complete. You have hurt me more than you could by any possible infliction upon myself. I defied you from the first, and I should have held out to the end. But here I cannot contend with you. I acknowledge my defeat. Still I ask nothing for myself; but I am willing to make any terms in behalf of this lady. I will make any amends you demand."

So far he had been talking to give his subordinate time to drop to his game and gather his scattered wits to meet the emergency.

Tom was at first rather flabbergasted by the unexpected stand his superior had taken, throwing the whole odium upon him. But gradually he came to see the drift of things; and this he proved by interrupting with a chuckle:

"I 'lowed as you'd come to it before I got through with ye, boss. When I lay myself out to git my work in, I ginerally git thar."

Dan Dirk's relief was beyond words to express at the quickness of wit of his henchman. He could have hugged big Tom Curtin, while he looked as if he longed to kill him.

"What ransom will satisfy you for the release of this lady? Do with me afterward as you please; but give me the assurance of her restoration to her mother."

"Oh, but this must not be! You are in trouble enough already on my account, dear Mr. Stilwell. I am grateful for your kindness; but I cannot allow you to involve yourself still more deeply for me."

Dan turned upon her a look of reproachful tenderness.

"I could wish that you were more willing to accept service from me," he said.

The girl flushed scarlet. There could be one significance to his words.

He was very considerate. He instantly said:

"I beg your pardon!"

Then he turned to Tom again.

"Your price?" he demanded. "Do not spare me. I accept nothing from such as you."

"Waal," drawled Curtin, "I reckon I'll have to think that over a bit. I didn't capture her to sell. She fills my eye purty well. I ain't often so well suited."

Vera shuddered with horror at the tone and look accompanying it. It was like that other, when he had first fastened his hateful clutch upon her.

She could not see that Tom was taking the only possible means of getting his superior out of the scrape into which he had blindly stumbled, so as to hold a private consultation and get his cue from him before he "put his foot into it."

"But I only wanted to show you as I had trumps to play when I took a notion. I reckon we kin take a walk now, an' you'll be more civil fur a spell. Nobody ever made nothin' by kickin' ag'in, Dan Dirk; an' don't you furgit it."

He turned and walked with a swagger toward the door, as if confident in his power over his prisoners.

Looking through the open door, Vera saw men lounging about; and it seemed to her that Mr. Stilwell was left free from personal bonds to make his hopeless captivity the more impressive.

"Oh, what will become of us?" she cried,

gazing into Dan's gloomy eyes. "And my mother! What must she be suffering now over my disappearance! It will kill her. Mamma! mamma!"

"Do not despair," said Dan, pressing the hand he held soothingly. "Something may yet be done."

"Oh, but there will be no repairing the mischief that monster has already wrought. He has my mother's life on his soul!"

Dan Dirk turned away, and got out of her presence as quickly as he could.

Her sob of despair as she cast herself on the rude settle that stood in the room rung in his ears from that moment through many a desperate hour.

"And I—I have brought this upon her!" he cried within himself, as he staggered away—"I who would have laid down my life for her! This is my act to drive her spirit from me. Ah, the gulf between us is wide enough now. All the repentance of all the wretches of the earth could not fill it! Her mother's life on my soul!—her curse following me through all my life!"

He got away by himself. Tom Curtin had the good sense not to follow him at once. He knew that when he was wanted he would be summoned.

"Like as not, he'll put the hull blame o' the thing on my shoulders!" growled Curtin to himself. "How was it possible that he could go fur her, an' never know who it was he was gobblin'? Or is he only tryin' to play roots on her? What is he up to, I'd like to know?"

He was destined to find out soon enough. Huge as he was, he fairly quailed under Dan Dirk's eye, when confronted by him for an explanation.

"How has this happened?" demanded Dan, standing white and still.

"How has what happened?" asked Curtin.

"How has it come about that you did not tell me who my captive was?"

"I didn't happen to know."

"But you must have seen her last night."

"As you did—in the dark."

"But when you brought her into the house?"

"Ask Selina about that."

"I ask you."

"Waal, then, Selina was too lazy to strike a light, or even to turn out o' bed; so I brung her in as she was, an' laid her down whar I was told to."

"All in the dark?"

"All in the dark."

"But you knew that the girl was at Murderer's Row. Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Beggin' your pardon, I didn't know as she was at the Row. An' ef I had, how should I have 'lowed as you didn't know what you was up to? I don't ginerally meddle with what don't belong to me. But, first an' last, I didn't know it, ef I'd wanted to dip in."

"I have not been near the accursed place since I last saw her there. Then she was leaving it, as everything on God's earth ought to flee it. What brought her back?"

"That I don't know, boss."

"Go and find out. But to what end? Stop! The mischief is done. How is it to be undone?"

Tom stood waiting his further orders.

"Clear out!" he suddenly commanded.

Tom went, without even a reproachful look.

Then Dan Dirk's rage broke loose, and he walked the confines of his room like a caged lion.

"I have been led into a trap like an ass by the nose!" he cried. "That accursed trickster has caught me in his net. Ah, what a blind dolt! Why did I lend myself to him—sell myself to him? What have I pledged myself to? Pledges! More folly! I'll kill him, curse him—that's the way I'll keep faith with him. I'll go out and meet him, man to man. If I fall, I shall at least have paid the forfeit of my life for her."

Looking carefully to his weapons, he left the house, so stern and stony that his men shrank from his notice.

He glanced at them with hatred, where their fear was too plainly marked.

Though it was now far into the small hours of the night, Dan Dirk's band had not gone to bed. They remained up awaiting the orders

of their chief. The business of the night was not yet complete. Only the vacillating mood of him to whom all looked for commands held it in arrest.

While they waited in idleness, and the hours he should have improved in the interests of his employer ran to waste, he, perhaps for the first time in his life, allowed his feelings to swerve him from the path to which he had pledged himself.

"Come along! I want you!" he said, as he passed his lieutenant, without so much as a glance at him.

Tom fell into his wake without a word, or even a look, of questioning or resentment.

Out of the camp they rode, and away at a round gallop. Tom Curtin took his place at the side of his chief, mutely. He was at hand if needed; he did not obtrude.

"Suppose," said Dan, abruptly, without looking at his companion, "a man refuses to redeem a pledge, but gives his life in the place of it. Does that go?"

"That," answered Tom, "wherever I've held out, is more than good."

"What is demanded, then?"

"A squar' fight is good enough fur any gentleman. Gents will, others must—&c."

Dan said no more.

A brisk ride of three or four miles brought them to a densely wooded glen.

In the midst of it they were suddenly confronted by a man who rode out into the middle of the way, as if to obstruct their passage.

Dan rode quite close up to him before drawing rein.

CHAPTER XXII.

A MASTERSTROKE.

IN such a trap as Lightning George found himself in by the closing of the window shutter, few men would have had the nerve he then exhibited.

The moment he had engaged Brad Turner with one of his own men, he made it a point to get in a crack which would put him *hors de combat*.

This left the others without an effective leader to rally them when the exigency came.

Finding himself entrapped as we have described, he now boldly centered attention upon himself by shouting:

"Gentlemen, let me introduce myself as Lightning George. Most of you probably know who that is, by this time. So far, I have tried to accomplish my end without serious injury to any of you. If any one has been shot, it was from your weapons, not mine. That I might have made a general slaughter among you, had I chosen, you cannot doubt. As it is, I captured your scout without hurting him; your leader is my prisoner here, also without injury; two or three of your men have been pitched through the window—and that is the sum of my hostility. Meanwhile, you—from your leader down—have been seeking my life. The question is, shall we now compromise this matter; or will you force me to begin to fight back in dead earnest? If it is to be war to the death, all right; but I warn you that I shall begin with your chief, who is here under my thumb."

That a man in such a situation should stop to address with perfect coolness those who were thirsting for his blood and striving for it by every means in their power, was enough in itself to cause a sudden arrest of activity, from astonishment.

The immeasurable self confidence exhibited, together with the prestige of the name he announced brought everybody to a stand, with a vague feeling that, after all, he might have the game in his own hands.

The audacity of the move was the secret of its success. The prison guards were curious to hear what might be urged by a man in such a situation.

Lastly, he had captured their chief!—the redoubtable Bully Brad Turner had been taken, just as the still greater King of No Man's Land had been, in the very midst of his men!

The fact that Brad did not bellow out a repudiation of the announcement of his fall, in his usual overbearing way, was evidence enough of the truth of what Lightning George claimed.

The general arrest of hostilities thus pro-

duced, had its effect on those in the conqueror's immediate vicinity.

One and all manifested a great eagerness to get beyond the reach of his formidable arm.

There was a perceptible rush away from him. But what the others did not know was, that Nivins of Virginia City was included in that movement.

While Lightning George held the general attention, the detective was for the moment forgotten.

No one dreamed of its being necessary to guard against his making his way boldly into the crowd, and pressing toward the door of the bull-pen.

Of course, in the darkness, he could not be distinguished from any one else, as long as he kept his mouth shut.

Acting on the instructions Lightning George had given him at the outset, modified by his own wit in taking advantage of any opportunity that offered, he was soon foremost among the defenders of the door against the assault of the party without.

Several shots had been fired through loopholes on either side of the door, wounding two or three of the assailants; and only the stubborn nerve of the Boy in Leather Breeches and his devotion to the man who had called out his keenest admiration, seconded by the bull-headed pertinacity of yer Uncle Ben, who never seemed to find it easy to let go, held them to the dangerous post of charging in the teeth of such opposition.

It was lucky for Lightning George that he had inspired such backers, and that that last charge was made. Even his "check" could not long stand off the men with whom he had to deal.

Nivins of Virginia City lifted the stout bars, above and below, out of their slots at one end; and the door came in with a sweep, knocking down some of the defenders, and admitting a dense body of the besiegers, battering-ram and all.

After that, organized defense was, of course, impossible.

Lightning George boldly sprung among the men against whom he had been so desperately arrayed, and was lost in the crowd that poured indiscriminately out of the bull-pen, every man now fighting his own way, regardless of friend or foe.

As he issued from the door, he gave the preconcerted signal; and so delighted were his men with this evidence of his safety, that, the cheer being started by the Boy in Leather Breeches, others took it up; and the men who had been a second time that night roused from sleep by the sounds—before of terror, now of combat, made up their minds that they would be too late for the melee, and only in time to participate in the celebration of a victory.

But the victors did not stay for any such demonstration. Instead, they scattered in every direction, so abruptly that their conquered adversaries had scarcely time to recover from the shock and fear of overthrow, when they found themselves left masters of the field, though deprived of their captive.

Brad Turner was a spectacle for gods and men, when he learned that he had been outwitted, and by whom.

In a way which would not readily leave a handle for offense, he had quietly slurred the King of No Man's Land for his similar mishap; and now the boys went for him rough-shod.

Never was a man laughed at as he; and few would have taken it with less philosophy.

He burned to slaughter the man who had humiliated him without striking a serious blow. The trick was, to catch him.

In spite of the laughter, Murderer's Row, almost to a man, formed itself into a war-party, swearing to fetch Lightning George in before they abandoned the enterprise; and headed by Brad, they set out in hot pursuit.

But Lightning George was not through at Murderer's Row yet. He had shrewdly forecast how things would turn out, and knew that, while the bulk of the town was in pursuit of him, if he could outflank them and steal back in their rear, the safest opportunity of all would be afforded him to prosecute his next project.

This move it was in nowise difficult for him to effect, separating from the body of

his followers with only two trusty supports—the Boy in Leather Breeches and yer Uncle Ben—accompanied, however, by the released Nivins, for a purpose which Lightning George was not called upon as yet to reveal.

His last act, at parting, was to draw a sum of money from a belt and present it to the man he left in charge, saying:

"Boys, you have served me well, and I will take no chance of failure to redeem my word with you. Here is the money I promised you, in case of success. I do not know how I shall finally come out of this thing. Every hour brings its chances of life or death. But, whatever happens to me, you will now not fail of your reward. I may want you in the future; and against that time I wish you to remember that I never go back on a man who belongs to me."

There was a decided disposition to cheer him, which, however, he prudently checked.

Then, accompanied by Nivins of Virginia City, the Boy in Leather Breeches, yer Uncle Ben, and a spare horse, he went his way, outflanked Brad Turner and re-entered Murderer's Row, just as the place had once more settled down to quiet, if not sleep.

He found Mrs. Stanard wrought almost to frenzy by her anxiety for her daughter and the repeated disturbances of the night.

When he presented himself, the distracted lady cowered against the wall, opposing his approach with outstretched hands and a stare of fear such as he had never before called to her eyes.

"Do not touch me! do not come near me!" she cried. "I am afraid of you! I am afraid of everybody! I must be going mad! Among you, you have killed my husband! Among you, you have stolen my child, to blight her young life with shame and misery. Go! go! and the curse of a wronged woman, a heart-broken wife, a despairing mother, go with you! Oh! oh! oh!"

"Mother! dear mother!" pleaded Lightning George, approaching her in spite of her charge to the contrary, "can you believe that I have failed you at such a moment? But would you have had me stop, even to console you, while our poor Vera was in such dreadful peril? I gave myself to the immediate pursuit of her and her abductor—"

"Have you brought her back? I am ready to believe in you, if you have brought her back!"

She threw out her arms to him in a despairing appeal which he fully understood, though he let no sign of his comprehension appear in his face.

"Alas, no!" he said, with infinite dejection in voice and mien. "But—"

"Ah!"

It was a cry of impotent rage, of terror, of despair unspeakable.

"Mother!" he appealed.

"Hands off! Dare you touch me? Dare you look me in the face? Oh, traitor beyond all conception of wickedness and cruelty! The murderer of my husband! The destroyer of my child! You—you dare to call me by the sacred name of mother! You speak it, and God withholds his avenging hand!"

"Great heavens!" cried Lightning George, turning pale at her charge. "What terrible thing has happened in my absence? Have you gone mad indeed?"

"Mother!" and his manner suddenly changed, as when one addresses another with a doubt of his sanity, "don't you know me? It is George. I have—"

Then he seemed shaken by a terrible burst of indignation.

"No! no! it cannot be that he has dared to descend to such villainy! Mother—I will never yield the right to call you so; and you must listen to me, and believe me too!—mother, I know that Rankin and the detective have been here. Failing to recover our dear Vera, I have yet been fortunate enough to effect the capture of them, and have them, where they can do no harm. Now hear me! If I find that they have dared to practice upon your misery, and sought to entrap you by undermining your confidence in me, and so dividing me, I will wring their hearts till they wish they had never seen the light of day!"

Never had she seen such a look on his

face. It was the iron implacability of the true Lightning George she now saw revealed.

But at the end his voice broke; his eyes grew suddenly humid; his brow was knit in the pain of hurt sensibilities.

It was as if he said:

"And you—you could be brought to doubt me?"

"Oh, it cannot be!" cried the distraught woman, suddenly throwing herself on his breast. "Forgive me! for—give—me!"

"Mother! mother!" he cried, clasping her close, as if he had recovered her across an immeasurable gulf. "Hush! not a word! We are together again!" he said, stifling her effort at explanation. "All is safe! Now I have my heart back, to go out again in defense of Vera."

"And I have brought you better news than you could even hope. Everything is in train for her recovery. I have men in attendance. This fiendish read-agent cannot escape us, nor can he retain her in his power more than twenty-four hours. I have him entirely surrounded, his retreat cut off, and him and his followers under the shadow of inevitable capture, if they do not prefer death."

"I have come to take you out of this accursed town, every man in which, almost, is devoted to the villain, or stands so in fear of him that they are ready to curry favor with him by playing into his hands."

"Have you the strength to go? You must make every effort. Remember, you are going to Vera. And once clear of this place, we shall be safe. I will teach these detectives, amateur as well as professional, that the miserable pittance they are working for was an unlucky bait!"

So, in the delicate manipulation of a woman's heart, this arch-dissembler won—over the truthfulness of Max Rankin, over the honest simplicity of Tony Dobson.

"I am ready!"

George's inquiry after Julia, Mrs. Stanard could not satisfy. The girl had disappeared, leaving no sign.

He left her to believe that the nurse too had been abducted; but after he got the deceived lady away from the house, he thought of something to call him back.

The state in which Julia had left her room satisfied him that she had gone voluntarily.

"What does she hope to accomplish?" he asked himself. "I have nothing to fear from her, if I keep her away from Vera. I will make sure of that! If you become too importunate, my dear, I shall have to put a squelcher on you!"

And he went his way with firm set lips.

Mrs. Stanard found Nivins bound, as became a prisoner, and turned from him in shuddering repulsion. He was a man-hunter—a woman-hunter, to be exact—the embodied representative of implacable persecution.

Free of Murderer's Row, Lightning George sent him, ostensibly in charge of yer Uncle Ben, to rejoin the party of Dan Dirk's men who were serving him under contract. His sham bonds were stricken off as soon as he passed beyond Mrs. Stanard's range of vision.

Lightning George bore Mrs. Stanard in another direction, accompanied by the Boy in Leather Breeches.

Whither he was being led, or why, the latter knew not. He was content to follow blindly the master who had constrained his admiration. How much or how little subsequent developments may have caused him to repent this devotion, certainly he was treated in the end to a decided surprise.

Having given Mrs. Stanard the shelter of a deserted brush-lean-to in the heart of a grove, Lightning George walked apart with the Boy in Leather Breeches, and remarked to him quietly:

"My dear sir, I hope you will set it down to no want of appreciation of your faithfulness, if I pronounce you my prisoner. I am about to enter into rather sharp competition with your chief, possibly, and of all his men accessible to me, you alone seem worth the trouble of a special effort to keep you out of the melee. Please to accept my action as a compliment to your prowess."

"A prisoner?" repeated the Boy in Leather Breeches, looking about inquiringly.

His hand was on his revolver long before Lightning George's rounded phrases were brought to a close.

To his surprise, his self-styled captor made no effort to anticipate him with the deadly drop.

"You have a strange way of makin' prisoners," the Boy observed; "an' this hyar's a queer place fur keepin' of 'em. Am I to be my own jailer?"

For answer Lightning George clasped his hands; and then was the Boy in Leather Breeches treated to the surprise which will be presently indicated, when another receives a like evidence of Lightning George's thorough methods of business.

A little later Lightning George rode away, and joined the party to which he had sent Nivins and yer Uncle Ben in advance.

It was supposed that he had left the Boy in Leather Breeches in charge of Mrs. Stanard, away from the excitement of a scene to which all were now looking forward.

With his men secreted in a dense coppice on either side of a lonely road, in the breaking dawn Lightning George rode out into the middle of the thoroughfare, to confront two men who came riding that way. Tom Curtin fell into the rear; Dan Dirk drew rein almost within arm's length.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WARM INTERVIEW.

It was now the gray of the morning; and in the midst of the mist-shrouded landscape these two men confronted each other very like belated phantoms.

This was the hour and this was the spot in which Dan Dirk was to be awaited by Lightning George, according to agreement.

Lightning George was at hand in readiness for the action they had marked out for this spot to witness; but far otherwise was the King of No Man's Land to have appeared.

The bitterness of disappointment unspeakable raged in Lightning George's heart; but not a trace of the internal perturbation appeared on the surface.

His serene countenance was as impassive as a bronze mask.

"Good-morning," saluted Lightning George.

"Good-morning," responded the King of No Man's Land, without the flexure of a muscle.

A pause followed, in which Lightning George seemed to await some overture which Dan Dirk did not choose to make.

Then the former spoke; and his voice was as soft as silk.

"May I ask the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of what?"

"Of your appearance here unaccompanied by what I had reason to expect."

"You expected me to fetch a helpless girl here, and turn here over to your tender mercies."

"That was our contract, was it not?"

"It was, undoubtedly."

"Well?"

"I did not know who the lady was."

"Was that necessary?"

"It is matter of consideration with me."

"I don't see how it can well be."

"You don't?"

"No. Was not our agreement clear?"

"You made it perfectly explicit."

"Then what more is there to say about it?"

"This: I have a personal interest in the lady."

"I don't see how that can affect me."

"You are able to conceive, perhaps, that it might affect me."

"Your feelings, perhaps. But there stands the contract."

"Which you are disposed to hold me to?"

"Undoubtedly."

"In spite of anything it may cost me?"

"I don't see that that is any affair of mine."

"I might be willing to ransom her."

"But I am not willing to accept a ransom."

"Of any sort?"

"Of any sort."

"I had thought of offering my life for her happiness."

"I prefer her happiness."

Lightning George smiled almost imperceptibly at his play upon Dan Dirk's words and meaning.

The King of No Man's Land flushed with sudden rage.

"You are a bold man!" he cried, his nostrils dilating.

"I am a consistent one," retorted Lightning George, quietly.

"Come!" ejaculated Dan, restive under the feeling that he was not getting the best of this contest, "suppose I repudiate this agreement?"

"I do not for a moment entertain such a possibility," answered Lightning George, with no outward evidence of disturbance.

"Why not?"

"Because I took the ordinary precaution to know my man before I intrusted to him a thing I did not wish to miscarry."

"To know me?"

"To know that you are a man of your word, at whatever cost—that you hold a pledge sacred, though perhaps few things else. That is all I cared to know about you. That is all that had any bearing on my business."

"You are extremely methodical, sir!" sneered Dan, bitterly.

"Method is the soul of business," returned Lightning George, pleasantly.

"And you refuse to release me?"

"Perforce. I know my mind when I begin. I never go back on it."

"There is a code among gentlemen which adjusts these little differences."

"I know of no difference. Are we not agreed as to the terms of the contract?"

"But if I refuse to comply with them, you have your right to satisfaction."

"I know of no satisfaction save fulfillment."

"Be it my privilege to teach you."

And Dan looked blackly at his opponent. Few men would have faced him as calmly as did Lightning George.

"If I am not, like the proverbial dog, too old to learn new tricks," answered Lightning George, "I at any rate have no time for such things now. I have an end to achieve. I wish not to be retarded on my way to it."

"But, sir, you cannot dispose of a challenge in this off-hand fashion!" cried the King of No Man's Land, waking up as with resentment of an insult.

"I stand upon an unequivocal right," answered Lightning George, steadily—"the right to the letter of my bond."

"I have repudiated it!"

"Verbally."

"Verbally?"

"I don't think you are quite serious—"

"By all the immortal gods!"

The wrath of the King of No Man's Land was something to blanch brave men.

It did not seem to stir a nerve in Lightning George's body.

"I believe in a man's past record," he said, as if it were a casual expression of opinion. "You have a record of absolute adherence to an engagement. When you have had time to consider—"

"Curse my record! I will force you into this fight. You have the satisfaction of a gentleman. I You—"

"Have not the only satisfaction which will acquit you with honor."

"I fling honor to the winds! The rags and tatters of a sentiment—"

"Dear to you, sir."

"On the contrary, I never saw so plainly as now the sham of the whole thing. I am to cover myself with infamy, in order to preserve my honor!"

"Let us say your reputation, then. That is often confounded with honor—more often than otherwise, I fancy, in the history of the gentlemanly code."

The perfect coolness of the speaker was unparalleled.

Dan Dirk was staggered by it. For a moment he sat staring dumbly.

"You refuse to fight me?" he asked, after a pause.

"I refuse," answered Lightning George.

"There is but one way to deal with a coward," observed Dan Dirk with sudden quietude.

"I agree with you, perfectly," answered Lightning George, as if this could have no possible personal application.

Dan was surprised into asking:

"And what way is that?"

"Kick him like a dog."

"I fancy," returned Dan, "I have a better way."

"And that?"

Lightning George seemed only interestedly expectant.

"To shoot him, like a dog."

And the King of No Man's Land drew his revolver, and slowly lifted its hammer, keeping his eye upon his opponent as a tiger might watch another.

It was vigilance thrown away. Lightning George sat comfortably in the saddle, without the slightest movement looking to self-defense.

"Why do you not look to yourself?" demanded Dan Dirk.

"Because there is no need," replied Lightning George.

"You think I don't mean it?"

"You may mean it just now."

"Well?"

"But when it comes to the pinch, the King of No Man's Land is not likely to fire at a disarmed man."

"But I have given you warning."

"Which you have no right to expect me to take."

Here was a perplexity. Dan Dirk's brows blackened with baffled fury.

"Do not tempt me!" he said, hoarsely. "You do not know how much I have at stake."

"I am just coming to realize. Are you—have you ever been—known as Mr. Stilwell?"

"What of that?"

"I am sorry for you. I should be glad to accommodate myself to your exigency, could I do so in justice to myself."

"Once for all, you demand the fulfillment of my pledge?"

"To the letter."

"A verbal pledge."

"True."

"Such a promise as any man might recede from on learning that he had been led into a trap."

"Excuse me! It was no trap. At the time, I had no idea that you had any interest in the matter."

"Still, a mere promise. You would have done well to bind me by oath."

"On the contrary, I think that would have tended to weaken my hold on you, if anything."

"Your hold on me! That's it!"

Dan Dirk suddenly thrust his revolver into its holster.

"Listen to me!" he cried, in tones and with a look that would have been trying to most men's nerves. "I mean to keep this pledge."

"I was confident you would."

"I shall give the girl up to you, as agreed."

"Undoubted from the first."

"But there the contract ends. You shall have the letter of your bond, as you yourself put it—the exact letter."

"That is all I ask."

"You shall have her. But the moment she is delivered, I am quit of my promise."

"With all honor, sir."

"I will give her, and take her again! There was no stipulation against that."

"None whatever, sir."

"Ha! ha! There I have you, curse you!"

And Dan shook his fist savagely at his impassive antagonist.

"That is your privilege," answered Lightning George, not a whit disturbed.

"An oversight, my fine fellow!" laughed Dan, tauntingly. "You are exceedingly keen; but the shrewdest sometimes leave too much of a margin."

"Whatever advantage you can gather from my want of foresight, is freely yours," declared Lightning George. "When I was a boy I learned to play games in strict accordance with the rules. The habit thus formed has stood me in good stead ever since. And now, sir, how soon may I expect the redemption of your pledge?"

"At once—as soon as horse-flesh can carry me to camp and back."

"Thank you. I will await you with what patience I can. We have lost some valuable time already."

"I beg your pardon! The moderation with which you temper your reproof wins

my respectful appreciation. Until we meet again!"

And bowing, the King of No Man's Land wheeled his horse, and dashed back over the course he had come.

Lightning George rode back into the covert with a quiet smile on his face.

As the light of the coming dawn waxed, the mist neutralized it by growing denser. Through this obscurity the King of No Man's Land and his silent subordinate plunged on their way back to camp. Dan Dirk now impatient of delay which left a broadening line between his pledge and his redemption of it.

It was especially trying, then, to be arrested by an abrupt challenge:

"Halt!"

CHAPTER XXIV. BETRAYED FOR LOVE.

Looking up—for his eyes had been gloomily fixed on the withers of his horse—Dan Dirk made out a figure so mist-enshrouded that, while its outlines were sufficiently distinct, its identity was not so cleverly revealed.

It was a person of small stature, seemingly a youth, in rather gay attire, judging from the contrast of color in dress, but whose face was shadowed by the gracefully drooped brim of a soft felt hat.

Seated squarely on a powerful horse—with its feet well braced, its head high, and its ears pricked forward—and presenting a brace of revolvers at arm's-length in apparent ease, as one habituated to the handling of such weapons, the challenger would have made a fair model for the sculptor.

But the voice, though clear and high, lacked volume, and so detracted from the formidable presence otherwise presented by this obstructor of the passage of the most dreaded man in all the Indian Territory.

When irritated, Dan Dirk was apt to be disdainful. He now scorned to notice this manikin, further than to submit to the abrupt halt of his horse, the animal knowing the significance of a challenge of that sort almost as well as a man.

"Shoot the fool!" commanded the King of No Man's Land, leaving the matter entirely to his subordinate, himself too contemptuously indifferent to draw a weapon, even in self-defense.

"Think better of it," advised the challenger, to Tom Curtin. "I hold your life in the crook of my finger. If the light were a little stronger, you could assure yourself by sighting along the barrel of my revolver."

Then to Dan Dirk:

"And I think that the King of No Man's Land would not wantonly expose his best man to the pistol-practice of Lightning George's favorite pupil."

"Bah!" scoffed Dan Dirk, in one of his ebullitions of furious rage. "Must I have Lightning George rammed down my throat at every tack and turn?"

And whipping out a revolver, it was through no lack of purpose on his part that the temerity of his youthful opponent did not reap fruit of annihilation.

He threw up the weapon, and pulled trigger, with that single snap-shot movement which is so terrible on the border.

But there was a flash of one of his challenger's revolvers just before his weapon came into line, and the servant that had never before failed of instant response to his will was now dumb.

It was natural that Tom Curtin would be loth to remain a passive spectator of this interchange at the risk of losing caste with his master.

He slapped his hand to his hip; but was arrested in his purpose by a perfectly steady voice admonishing:

"Hold, Tom Curtin! Look to the effect of my first shot before you provoke me to a second. I may favor you less than I have your master. He may be of service to me. I care nothing for you, living or dead."

In surprise Dan Dirk looked down at his weapon.

The hammer had been shot away.

"Hang me if that wasn't a clever shot, if not a remarkable accident!" he ejaculated.

It was characteristic of Dan Dirk that what commanded his admiration should at once receive his respect.

He was instantly restored to good humor, and spurred to curiosity to know who this unusual marksman might be.

"What is it?" asked Curtin, who had long been a student of his master's moods, and had come to adapt himself to them with wonderful cleverness.

"The rascal has shot the cock off of my revolver!"

"If you think it was accident," interposed the challenger, "draw the other on me. However, it is only fair to say that I am not universally so successful. I may take away a finger next time—by accident, though, I assure you. I will do my best not to injure you."

"A remarkable road-agent, I'll be bound!" exclaimed the King of No Man's Land. "We have few such in this country, or any other I ever visited. Maybe you carry your eccentricity so far as to crave the privilege of putting money into our pocketbooks, instead of emptying it out of them."

"Neither the one nor the other."

"Indeed? What might be your business with us? Instead of resisting you, I should have begun with an overture for better acquaintance."

"It is not too late to repair your error. It is your acquaintance alone that I seek, and your ear for a moment."

"Will you allow me to plead haste, and express my desire to meet you at some future time?"

"My own business is pressing."

"Oh! you are not altogether disinterested, then, in your attentions?"

"Few people are. But if I press for an immediate hearing, it is for your interest as well as for my own."

"Indeed? You pique my curiosity, though I must still urge for an indulgence of a few hours—say till noon."

"It might then be too late."

"My honor is somewhat involved, if I may so far appeal to your consideration."

"And my happiness. But I am willing to detain you as little as possible. Allow me to ride at your side; and we can converse as we go."

"That is reasonable. And your matter is private? My companion, here, will be in the way?"

"It might do to allow him to follow at a reasonable distance."

With a wave of the hand, Dan Dirk indicated his pleasure; and Tom Curtin held back as his master pressed forward to join the person who had so strangely sought an interview of him.

As Dan came close enough to make out the lineaments of the face of his new acquaintance, he was still more surprised at its youthful aspect.

"May I ask whom I have the pleasure of meeting?"

"Julia Winters."

"Eh! What! You don't mean to say—"

"I am a woman—a desperate one. When forced to it, we will do almost anything."

"Within the range of your abilities. Allow me to remark that few of your charming sex exhibit your versatility of talent."

"I am an actress; and I have studied my art with loving devotion. But that is not to the purpose now. I have stern business with you, and would be about it at once."

Her voice, following the emotion of the moment, was now pained, so that it lost much of the strength of the moment before, and became softer and more womanly.

Dan Dirk was charmed and interested at once.

"I attend you," he said. "What can I do to serve you?"

"Probably nothing," she answered, now with a thread of despondency veining her voice—"nothing material; yet possibly something that will defer for a time the misery that must come in the end. A respite is all I hope for."

"Believe that I shall be anxious to do what I can."

"You have a captive, taken last night."

Dan Dirk started.

"A-a-ah!" he exclaimed, slowly.

"Do you know who that captive is?" persisted the actress.

"To my cost!" burst forth Dan Dirk, bitterly.

"I understand you. But I wished to go beyond your personal feelings. Do you

know her relation to the man who employed you to abduct her?"

"How do you know that I was employed to abduct her?"

"I suspected it at first. I have since been to the trouble to confirm my suspicion."

"He told you?"

"On the contrary, it was you yourself."

"I! I never saw you before."

"But I have had you under my eye, and within range of my ear too."

"When?"

"During the earlier part of the night just past—or rather this morning."

"Where? Under what circumstances?"

"In your camp. While you were talking to yourself, unconsciously aloud a part of the time."

"What! do you mean to say that you have stolen into the very heart of my camp, and played the eavesdropper without detection; in the very midst of my men, when they were all awake?"

"You have put it quite clearly. I have done all that."

"You are a bold woman!"

"I am a desperate one."

"I recall now, that you declared yourself a pupil of Lightning George, with the revolver. You must have gone to school to him too in this matter."

Dan spoke not without bitterness. His experiences of the past few days were galling, in spots.

"I may have caught something of his spirit," admitted Julia Winters. "I should have fared ill with him if I had it not, either native, or by imitation."

"You have been associated with him, then?"

"As you said a moment ago—to my cost."

Dan Dirk started; but instead of manifesting excitement by a flurried exterior, he seemed to become more intensely self-restrained.

"What have been his relations with you, may I ask?"

"He is bound to me by every sentiment of honor."

Dan Dirk began to breathe deeply.

"And repudiating you—"

"I do not believe that he would desert me, but that this girl—"

"A sudden infatuation. Man is fickle. The best of us are liable to change of taste."

"It is not that. He cannot be infatuated with her. He has known her all his life. But he is a ruined man, eager to retrieve his broken fortunes by the appropriation of her wealth."

"She is rich, then?"

"She herself does not know it. She believes that her father died a ruined man. But he knows that one of his speculations promises to be an almost inexhaustible mine of wealth. But for this, I should not fear her. As it is, I do not believe that he has abandoned me finally for her."

"What!"

It was an explosion of feeling. Dan Dirk immediately recovered himself, however, retreating again into intense alertness.

"Tell me about him and his projects," he petitioned.

"Tell me first," objected the girl, "what you know of them. What is your engagement with him?"

Dan complied, with greater readiness than she had dared to hope.

"In self-justification, let me begin by saying that I had no idea who the lady was; or I should not have lent myself to him. I met her—"

"As Mr. Stilwell."

"You know that?"

"I have taken pains to inform myself of what might be of vital concern to me. I should not be here else."

"Well, I supposed that she and her mother were far enough from this accursed place so that I should never see either of them again."

"But had not any woman a claim upon your forbearance?"

Dan Dirk answered with an indifferent shrug.

"He represented her as a girl whom he might win, if he could but strike her fancy by some romantic adventure. I was to abduct her; he to rescue her from me; and all would go well."

"And that is the entire scheme?"

"The whole, as far as I know it."
 "He is infatuated indeed, but with himself! But that is little to the purpose. The question of importance is, whether this project is to be carried out."

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Are you willing?"

"I?"

"You."

"What have I to do with it? It is no concern of mine. Let them settle the matter between them."

"You forget that I overheard you."

"And so know better than my present statement?"

"Exactly."

"Well, what of it? I entered into a bargain. It is my own fault if my eyes were not open."

"Are you disposed to look at it in that way?"

"What other way is there in which to look at it?"

"Why, a bad promise were more honored in the breach than in the fulfillment. One would think that was clear enough."

"For a woman, possibly. Not for a man."

"Oh, indeed! You have an unusually exalted opinion of your sex."

"Let us say, then, not for me. I make it a point to exact fulfillment; and I never demand more than I concede."

"I have been told that you pride yourself on being a man of your word."

"It is my one virtue, possibly."

"And do you mean to say that for this sentiment you are resolved to sacrifice the woman you—"

"Excuse me, madam!"

"Let us say, then, such a girl as this. You will sacrifice her to such a man?"

"Such a man? What sort of a man? You may remember that you have as yet told me nothing about him."

"I will repair that omission."

Julia Winters began to glow, her eyes to flash. She had resolved upon a desperate move. The idea of betraying Lightning George was not a grateful one to her.

It was her nature to love the unattainable, to cling to that which sought to escape. The more he abused her, the more did the sentiment of faithfulness to him strengthen. If he had been her slave, she might have held him lightly, and in time shifted him for another.

But she would even betray him, to keep him.

"Her father and his were boyhood friends. On the orphanage of George Gleason Harold Stanard received him into his own family by adoption, reared him as he would have reared a son of his own, educated him, and gave him a place in his business. Young George was the reverse of what Harold Stanard would have wished, in almost every respect; but the elder man bore with him and condoned his faults for his father's sake."

"This kindness George abused. His dissipation cost money. To gain it, he pushed speculation into the most reckless gambling. He thus brought himself and his benefactor to the verge of ruin—"

Julia Winters stopped. There was a far-away look in her eyes. She was debating with herself how far she should carry this revelation.

Suddenly she recovered herself, from a fit of silent abstraction far longer than she had any idea of; and looking sharp round at Dan Dirk, concluded:

"Harold Stanard died. There was a grave question about the mode of his taking off. Some held that he had resorted to suicide, rather than face the world a ruined and dishonored man. Some whispered that there were domestic secrets that would not bear the light—in short, that his wife was criminally responsible for his death."

"Do you believe that?"

"I?"

The question was short and sharp. The answer was with a start, and a sudden change of color. Julia Winters's voice had sunk toward the end of her narrative, and she had whitened with horror as she repeated the accusation against Mrs. Stanard. Dan Dirk's question brought a stream of blood sweeping over her face and neck, which receded again, leaving her paler than before.

"Well," said Dan, as if his question had been an idle one, "what was the upshot of the matter?"

"Mrs. Stanard was imprisoned, but before her trial, managed to effect her escape, and became a fugitive to this distant retreat. Lightning George followed her in the character of of a faithful son, and so sought to win upon the affections and gratitude of her daughter."

"Was her escape effected through the procurement of Lightning George?"

"Is not that a side issue?"

"Naturally you do not wish to compromise him more than necessary."

"The question is, shall you sacrifice this girl to him?"

"I am pledged."

The actress waved that aside impatiently.

"Shall you do it?" she insisted.

"I shall keep my word," he made answer.

"At whatever cost?"

"At whatever cost."

"Well, you are a most remarkable man."

"I hope there are many more like me, in that respect."

"I hope not! Good-by!"

"Excuse me!"

She sought to rein her horse round, to leave him.

He suddenly laid his hand upon her bridle-rein.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"To detain you," he answered, quietly.

"To detain me?"

"Exactly."

"As a prisoner?"

"As my guest."

"I do not understand you."

"We shall have ample time to talk it over."

"Before you let me go?"

"Before you bring yourself to deprive me of your company."

"Come!" said the girl, not losing her coolness, "I have been frank with you."

"Yes, your frankness is a reproach to me. Well, then, I will tell you why I am disposed to detain you."

"You will have an eager listener."

"I believe that you are an accomplice of Lightning George."

"An accomplice?"

"His willing tool, and a most able one."

"His tool? To betray him?"

"In seeming."

"Oh! you are far out. The happiness of my life is at stake. He is on the point of destroying me. Nothing short of this would induce me to turn against him. I know that you love this girl. I have appealed to you to take her out of my path. If you will not serve me, why are you so besotted as to refuse to serve yourself? What is the tenor of the considerations I have urged upon you? To induce you to keep the girl away from Lightning George. Is that being his tool? You are beside yourself—or disingenuous."

"Let it pass at that. Nevertheless, I shall— Ah!"

There was a sudden explosion, and Dan Dirk fell headlong from his horse.

CHAPTER XXV.

A "HIPPIDROME."

NOT Dan Dirk himself could be more amazed at this ending of his interview than was Tom Curtin, who witnessed it at a little distance, out of earshot.

His master, the redoubtable King of No Man's Land, once "bagged, body an' breeches," as he put it, by Lightning George, was now outwitted, and perhaps "rubbed out," by a mere stripling.

"A pupil o' Lightnin' George's! Great Scot!" cried Tom Curtin to himself. "I'd better go to school to him, I reckon. Ef he makes boys like that, what kind o' men would he turn out?"

He saw the stripling leap from his own saddle to the back of the magnificent black stallion which was Dan Dirk's especial pride—and with reason, since he could show his heels to anything that had ever ranged that country of fleet horseflesh.

Away scoured the youthful robber, on the wings of the wind.

Dan Dirk lay where he had fallen.

As in duty bound, Tom Curtin dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and set out in

pursuit, with a yell of astonishment and resentment.

But, truth to tell, in moments of unusual honesty with himself, afterward, he was in doubt whether he had honestly desired to overtake that pupil of Lightning George's, even if it had been possible to match the speed of the black stallion.

Giving over the futile chase as soon as decency permitted, he returned to look after his fallen master.

To his astonishment, he found Dan Dirk sitting up, mechanically rubbing his forehead.

"What's the row, boss?" he asked.

"I scarcely know," answered the King of No Man's Land, vaguely. "I seem to have fallen, and struck my head."

"Waal, I should say so!" declared Tom, in wonder. "It's luck ef you hain't got a hole blown clean through it. Let me look."

"How could I have a hole blown through it, as you say?" asked Dan, who was not yet himself.

"Why, the youngster might 'a' done it, ef he'd liked, I reckon."

Then, with a start, recollection came back, and Dan Dirk stared about in eager quest of the captive he had held, it seemed only an instant before.

"Where has he gone? Where is my horse?" he demanded, struggling to his feet, though he stood somewhat dizzily for a moment.

"Why, the youngster got away with it. A monkey couldn't 'a' climbed his back quicker."

"And you let her escape with a horse I would have given the lives of half a dozen of you, rather than lose!"

"That's jest it, Cap. Whar's the hoss-flesh to go after Black Warrior?"

But Dan Dirk was not in a particularly rational mood. He raged—to no purpose. The horse was gone. He had to end by accepting the one Julia Winters had left in his stead.

"But I will outwit them yet!" he swore.

And, followed by his satellite, he dashed away to his camp.

Here Tom Curtin, acting under instructions, went to Vera.

"Waal, my dear," he said, "it's time we was movin' on. It seems you had purty considerable backin' at the Row, an' your takin'-off has kicked up quite a muss. But when they git away with the King, I reckon they'll have to start airly in the mornin'. We'll be ready fur you in five minutes. Ef you've got ary leetle preparation to make, you'd better do it now. Once started, we won't be likely to stop before night. Maybe Seliny hyar will give you a mite to eat, ef you happen to get hungry."

At the stipulated time they set out, Mr. Stilwell appearing as a fellow captive.

Though Vera longed to speak to him, he did not approach her.

He was without weapons, to all outward appearance, and his arms seemed to be securely bound. Otherwise he was free. Indeed, that he might guide his horse, his arms were tied before him, instead of behind his back.

Away they rode, over the way Dan Dirk and his right-hand man had twice traveled already that morning.

In the glade where they had been confronted by Lightning George, they were once more stopped, this time in a more startling manner.

They had penetrated to the very heart of it, when a sudden fusilade was poured into them from both sides of the road. Then into view leaped a land of armed men, who attacked them with the seeming fury of demons.

All in an instant was wildest confusion. Vera, who had never witnessed violence before, thought that nothing could result short of mutual annihilation.

She saw horses leap into the air with screams of pain and snorts of terror, and either break away madly, beyond all control, or perhaps throw themselves over backward, and roll on the ground, with their heels in the air, while their riders escaped, or were crushed under them, according to their agility.

In the midst of the flame and smoke and dust, she espied Lightning George, her eye attracted to him by his calling her by name.

Never had he appeared to such advantage before. He was fighting his way toward her, opposed by Tom Curtin—Dan Dirk, as she supposed—who massed his men about her, as if determined to hold on to her at all hazards.

The battle was right royal, to the inexperienced eye of the terrified girl. To the participants it was a sham one, save that horses were really sacrificed, to give it realism. Men enough were down, who had to stand their chance of being fallen or trampled upon; and it was possible that one might be found by a chance bullet. But it was understood that this was not the design. No man was to be deliberately shot.

"Retreat!" shouted Curtin, when it became apparent that his party was being over-matched.

They wheeled, to make their way over the road they had come.

Then, amidst the jolting, Vera was electrified by the appearance of Mr. Stilwell at her side.

His arms were now free. Somehow he had got possession of weapons.

"Keep close to me, if possible," he enjoined her. "There may be a chance. Here!"

And he thrust a revolver into her hand, with the injunction:

"As a last resort against that ruffian!"

Mechanically the girl received the weapon, though ignorant of its use. But Dan Dirk had gained his point. She appreciated his care for her.

Then began a running fight, which was ended almost as soon as begun.

Lightning George had evidently forecast this maneuver, and had stationed his men to frustrate it. Into the road they poured, cutting off all retreat.

Then the fight became indiscriminate. Vera, her head in a whirl, could no longer follow it. She was jostled on every side by the plunging horses, her own not the least unmanageable; and seemed in imminent danger of being thrown and trampled under foot.

How she became separated from Mr. Stilwell she did not know; but somehow they were crowded apart, and he or she was borne away in the ebb and flow of the surging tide.

Finally she felt an arm passed about her waist, and turning to struggle hand to hand with the ruffian she supposed to be Dan Dirk, she confronted Lightning George, who had fought his way to her side.

"It is I, Vera," he said. "Do not lose heart. In a moment you will be safe."

"Oh, George!" she exclaimed, now seizing him and clinging to him as she had done on his appearance at the shanty where she and her mother had found refuge in Murderer's Row.

"Rally! rally!" he shouted, swinging his revolver about his head.

And his men closed in about him and her; and she saw Tom Curtin, fighting still desperately, in full retreat.

As if satisfied with her capture, and eager first to get her to a place of security, Lightning George and his immediate followers set off in another direction, and were soon out of sight of the conflict.

"And mother?" cried the girl, her thoughts flying on the wings of love to one as dear to her as herself. "How has she endured it?"

"Bravely, though almost completely crushed. I shall never forget our meeting. But she is in security now, away from that hateful place, which she shall never revisit. And she is more hopeful. I assured her of my prospect of speedily recovering you; and she seemed to repose entire confidence in my success. You know, she has always believed in me."

Lightning George smiled, a little sadly, as if in half reproach for the daughter's difference of feeling.

Vera uneasily shifted the topic of conversation.

"But you said—she is away from Murderer's Row?"

"Yes. You shall presently be re-united with her."

"Oh, shall I? Oh! oh! Dear, dear mother!"

"You know what this longing of the heart is, you both exhibit it so keenly," ob-

served Lightning George, very gently, in deep-voiced sadness.

Again Vera hastened away from that dangerous ground.

"But you were allowed to remove her from the town? This terrible Dan Dirk has such absolute sway there, that I feared she would be as much in his power as I myself."

"It was my fortune to have a bout with him on the occasion of an attack on the stage; and he may have lost prestige somewhat, by reason of my having got rather the better of him," answered Lightning George, with the mingled frankness and reserve of a modest man forced to an explanation which reflected credit on himself.

"I heard of it," admitted Vera.

Then, in despair of getting the conversation out of this personal channel, she made a bold plunge.

"But where is Mr. Stilwell? Did you see him?"

"Stilwell? Who is he? Oh, I remember! Your rescuer. But what was he doing here?"

"He was a prisoner, along with me."

"Indeed!"

"Through his championship of our cause. I hope nothing will befall him on that account. Would it be possible for you to look after him? You seem to have so many men."

"Of course. Here!—Willis!"

A man rode up and saluted almost in military form.

"Do you know a Mr. Stilwell when you see him?"

"Perfectly."

"Take half a dozen men—I think we can spare that many. There is little likelihood of our being attacked, don't you think? Take half a dozen, then, and go and see if you can find him. It seems that he also was a prisoner when we made the attack."

After this display of magnanimity, in which Lightning George seemed to suppress the jealousy he had previously evinced, nothing further intervened before Vera was placed in her mother's arms.

The meeting between mother and daughter would have been an affecting one, had any been allowed to witness it.

With rare delicacy Lightning George gave the girl no intimation of her vicinity to that great happiness, till the grove was reached in which Mrs. Stanard awaited her, now buoyed up by the sentiment of confidence and affection she was sedulously cherishing for Lightning George, in recompense for her hour of doubt, and now overborne by the weight of accumulated perils that had gathered about her child.

Going to the lean-to, George first greeted the anxious mother with a reassuring smile.

"Vera!" was the one ejaculation.

"She is safe, dear mother. She has been rescued, as I assured you she would be, unharmed save for the shock of being torn from you."

"And—and—and—"

The mother was panting wildly, her tremulous hands clasped, her eyes devouring his.

"She is on her way here—"

"She is with you! You have her! She is waiting while you prepare me! Oh! oh! oh! how can she stay out of my arms for a moment? Vera! Vera!"

She started up with preternatural strength, to tear herself out of his arms, and fly to her child.

"Hush! hush!" he admonished, soothingly.

Of a sudden her artificial strength failed her, and she sunk back weeping.

"You can fetch her now. See—I am calm. Do not torture me, George, in your kindness."

He left a son's kiss on her cheek—a profanation, coming from his lips.

He bore away with him her holy tears of gratitude on his hand.

"How long must we wait here?" asked Vera, when he approached her. "I am all of a tremble with eagerness to get to my dear mamma."

"In a few minutes now we shall be in motion again. Do you see that brush hut? You will find greater privacy there while you are waiting."

She went, he looking after her with his heart in his eyes.

Just before she reached the lean-to, he saw her start violently and stop. Her ear had caught a sob, drawn from her mother by the sound of her approaching footsteps.

Then she flashed round the angle of the structure, and a cry came to him.

With a sudden knitting of the brows in longing and bitter disappointment, Lightning George turned away.

"Never for me!" he muttered, under his breath—"never for me!"

Swinging into the saddle, he rode up to his waiting men.

"Come, boys!" he said, "I want a few good pickets."

He selected them, and they rode away at his back.

After an interval he returned, and took some more in another direction.

The squad that was left, accompanied him at his bidding on his reappearance; and when he came back from having stationed them, he was alone.

His reception by Mrs. Stanard was all that he could have asked. Vera was nervously grateful, but with an evident fear of giving rise to false hopes.

He got her away from her mother on a plea of selecting suitable food for her. Then his pent passion once more burst forth.

His previous plea was as nothing, compared with the flood of passionate protestation with which he now overwhelmed her.

As gently as she could, yet with inflexible firmness, she denied him as before.

Then his manner changed to an intensity of repressed feeling that frightened her.

"This is my last appeal," he said, hoarsely, slowly rising from his knees, and letting his eyes rest on the ground, in avoidance of hers. "Nothing will move you?"

And she answered:

"Nothing!"

Then his face took on such a look of malignant resolve, that the girl stared at him in wondering apprehension.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE KING IS FALLEN!

"WELCOME! welcome, my dear fellow!" exclaimed Lightning George, with the eager greeting of a familiar friend. "Never so welcome as now! You are just in the nick of time, as you always are. How well you are looking. I am charmed to see you. Dismount, sir. And it will be a long time before you think of remounting, if my poor entertainment can entice you. Your men? Why, of course. I tender you the hospitality of the olden time. Pray consider everything here your own."

By this sort of address from the man he had come to crush, Dan Dirk was rather taken aback.

"Welcome? In the nick of time?"

"Assuredly. A lucky star must have guided you."

"In the nick of time for what?"

"Why, to felicitate me. I claim your congratulations. When should a man welcome all the world—not to say his most valued friends—with greater warmth than at the moment of his greatest happiness?"

"Then you are happy just now?"

"With reason! Could there be greater?"

And certainly Lightning George had the appearance of happiness, or at least of jollity. He rubbed his hands as smiling as a landlord welcoming an all-summer guest.

"And the cause of your especial happiness?"

"My approaching marriage. By Jove! you shall be my best man!"

"This is a sorry joke, sir."

"No joke, I assure you. A blissful reality! You wouldn't have me say a grave, or even a serious one, surely. Hang me, if I don't think I shall laugh at intervals, all the rest of my natural life!"

Dan Dirk flushed. Laugh? At what? At him? And why?

"Come! come, sir!" he ejaculated, frowning blackly. "Let us have done with this travesty. I will teach you to laugh, at least on one side of your mouth. Do you fancy that you have corrupted my men? I will have stronger evidence of it than your confidence, before I credit it."

"Corrupt your men? My dear sir! Would you believe such a thing of me, even if they were not incorruptible? But, I as-

sure you, I have attempted no such treachery. They have served me well. I have requited them, with both money and good-will. But I shall return them to you in their previous angelic purity."

"Where are they?"

"And do you ask me such a question—you have come here breathing war? Pray, summon them. Or maybe you would have me."

Dan was more and more perplexed.

"As you will," he said.

Lightning George clapped his hands; and the King of No Man's Land was treated to the same surprise that had greeted the Boy in Leather Breeches.

Out from the bushes on every hand leaped armed men. In every hand was a carbine, which went to the shoulder with mechanical precision.

Dan Dirk and his little band of followers were shut in by a circle of frowning muzzles that at a word threatened annihilation.

The King of No Man's Land looked about on this array in undisguised astonishment. Not a face in the circle was familiar to him.

Who were these backers whom Lightning George had summoned, as if out of the very ground? Where were the men whose temporary service he had purchased of Dan Dirk?

With these men at his back, he assuredly had no need of them. Then why had they been employed?

Dan Dirk had not far to seek for an answer to these questions. The flower of his force had been drafted away from him. In some way they had been disposed of, so as to be beyond his call. And now, stripped of his sovereignty, he was menaced—already a captive!—in his own domain.

"Trapped," he muttered, under his breath. "Once more outwitted by this—"

"Sir, you are my guest," said Lightning George, bowing with mock suavity.

"Your prisoner!" amended the King of No Man's Land, with corroding inner bitterness.

"Pray, sir, put a better face on it—at such a time, in so propitious circumstances."

"Shall we cut out o' this?" whispered Tom Curtin, at Dan's elbow.

For answer the King of No Man's Land swung out of the saddle, and drawing forth his weapons, tendered them to his would-be entertainer.

"I surrender," he said. "You have conquered me in more ways than one."

"Oblige me! Keep your weapons, sir," insisted Lightning George. "You forget that you are my guest."

"I prefer to be your prisoner, in appearance, as well as in fact."

"But I should find the relation too embarrassing. Besides, all must be gay at my wedding—I am sorry that I cannot add *feast*. You I would have gayest of all, my dear sir. I repeat my invitation. Be my best man."

"Your mockery is unbecoming. It is the least expected of your acts."

Lightning George bowed in submission.

"If that rebuke is merited," he said, with sudden seriousness, "it shall at least not be incurred again. I still insist that you are my guest. Your men, to avoid the consequences of indiscretion, may be placed under some slight restraint—only as to their movements."

Dan Dirk bowed; and his men were quietly placed under a guard. Otherwise they were left free.

"And now," resumed Lightning George, "you may still retain some curiosity as to the disposal of the men you were kind enough to lend me."

"If you please."

"Follow me."

And Dan Dirk was conducted by him to another part of the chaparral, where he found his men bound hand and foot.

"I did not know what force you could bring against me," explained Lightning George. "In case of a battle, I thought it wiser to have these, at least, secure."

"Boys," he addressed them, "I have already apologized to you for the necessity of treating you so ill on the heels of your having served me so well. The fellows I enlisted before coming to the Row, and whom I have had to place as guards over you, I do not love half so well. I have not been under fire with them."

The prisoners did not manifest any great ill-will toward the master of the situation, though, under the eye of their fallen chief, they preserved a discreet gravity.

Dan Dirk turned away, sick at heart. Never again should he stand to them as in the olden days. The King of No Man's Land was no more!

"And now this marriage?" he asked, as they walked back toward the brush lean-to which sheltered the woman his heart was bleeding for.

"Ah!" ejaculated Lightning George, with the start of a happy lover recalled from momentary forgetfulness of his bliss. "I had just secured her consent, when you made your appearance. My dear sir, I owe everything to you. I shall never forget the obligation."

Lightning George look brightly at the gloomy man walking at his side, but had the grace not to offer his hand in simulated gratitude.

Dan Dirk winced. So he had been instrumental in winning her fancy to such a man as this!

And yet, when he came to think of it, what did he know against Lightning George. The testimony of a woman supplanted by a rival. To put the worst face possible on the matter, the object of the detraction was to induce him to remove that rival. Dan Dirk did not need to be told the probable value of such evidence.

On the other hand, here was a man of altogether unusual address—a master of men. He must have acquired, or at least perfected it, in conflict with desperate men. What then? Was he necessarily worse than men average? He had the bearing of a gentleman. His relation to these ladies proved that he had *entree* of good society. They knew him intimately. If they approved him, was not this sufficient guarantee of his respectability?

"If she can find her happiness in him, what right have I to interfere?" asked Dan Dirk of himself— "I—I!"

And he could have laughed in his bitter self-contempt.

Lightning George had indeed provided a minister. He was in charge of what is called a Mission, and was notable for strength of lungs and earnest warfare against the Powers of Darkness, rather than for any marked intelligence. He had married more than one bride procured in the first instance by abduction. He was a conscientious man, and would not have officiated where he believed that the prospective bride was under constraint. But if she had been brought to consent, and appeared satisfied at the time, he was not disposed to make any over-curious scrutiny into the methods employed.

Vera was found to have recovered consciousness. She was smiling and striving to talk to her mother as a happy bride should.

But when was there ever so ghastly a mockery? Her smile made her mother weep, though she attributed its wanness to the suffering the girl had endured, and not to its true cause.

Mrs. Stanard had now not a shadow of doubt of Lightning George. Had he not redeemed his pledge and given her daughter back to her arms? And Vera loved him! No other guarantee could have been equal, not to say superior, to this.

At sight of Dan Dirk, Vera started, and a truer smile came to her lips.

"Oh, Mr. Stilwell!" she exclaimed. "Mother, he is safe!"

She turned to Lightning George and said: "For this I thank you."

"Sir," said Mrs. Stanard, greeting Dan with a grateful smile, "we owe you much that we can never repay save in kindly remembrance."

While looking toward Lightning George and thanking him for his magnanimity, as she supposed, Vera had advanced to greet the man who, she believed, had endured peril and hardship for his defense of her.

To her amazement, as she turned her eyes toward him, she found him standing with folded arms, and eyes on the ground, with evidently no intention of meeting her advances.

"Miss Stanard," he said, "and you, madam, I humble myself at your feet. I am not worthy—I have never been—of the kindly feeling you have entertained toward me."

"Oh!" ejaculated Vera, with a gesture of protest.

"From first to last I have deceived you," he persisted, steadily; "but now there shall be no more deception."

"Mr. Stilwell!"

"That name is now a reproach to me. It was my mother's name. On the impulse of a moment I dared to put it to the use I did. My name is Daniel Joseph Falkner—Dan Dirk, they call me, the now fallen King of No Man's Land."

"Dan Dirk!"

Vera stared at him in amazement.

He and his men had been captured while she was yet unconscious. Thus far she had been so occupied with her mother in the lean-to, that she had not noticed the presence of the prisoners who were in sight from the spot, outside of the lean-to, where she now stood.

Now her eyes passed beyond the speaker, and alighted upon Tom Curtin.

"Surely there is some mistake," she protested. "There he stands. Did you secure him too?" she asked Lightning George, with a shudder.

"That is my lieutenant, whom you mistook for me; discovering which, I allowed him to continue as my scape-goat. He is a slight offender, compared with me. It was I who abducted you."

With a start Vera recalled the perplexity of reconciling the speech of that midnight visitant with the brutality of the man she knew as Dan Dirk. The truth burst upon her. She shrunk back with a murmur of dismay.

"Let me tell the *whole* truth," pleaded Dan Dirk. "It is no excuse, but some personal extenuation, I hope, that I did not know whom I was injuring."

Lightning George started. Was this to be his *révenge*—a complete revelation?

But Dan Dirk said no more. He left Vera in no little perplexity. A score of questions arose in her mind. When he discovered who she was, why did he not then relent?

"You are now free of me; at which, I beg you to believe, I rejoice. Your rescuer, and my conqueror, is pleased to put upon me the mockery you see. I am his guest, he tells me."

Lightning George breathed more freely. It appeared that he was not to be betrayed.

Vera struggled for speech, and finally said, with wonder and reproach, more than condemnation, in her eyes:

"I refrain from judging you. I do not understand you."

"It were better so," answered Dan Dirk, bowing and keeping his eyes on the ground in deep humility.

Then, by Lightning George's urgency, the wedding was proceeded to.

Dan Dirk stood like a man of stone as it progressed, till the vows of the bride were reached.

A dead silence followed the demand of the preacher. It continued so long, that Dan Dirk looked up to ascertain the cause.

He saw the bride standing like one struck with paralysis, struggling for speech. Her eyes, fixed upon the face of her prospective husband, were filled with unmistakable horror, and she grew whiter and whiter as the moments passed—and still no sound from her lips.

With a sudden great cry, Dan Dirk sprang forward, and caught her in his arms, just as she was swaying on the verge of unconsciousness.

"By Heaven!" he cried, "she does not love you! This is enforced! My darling, is it true?"

With a mighty effort, and spurred by the suddenness of this revelation, the girl recovered her waning consciousness, and freed herself from his embrace.

But he maintained his stand between her and Lightning George, with drawn revolver.

"This cannot go on," he declared, "till I am further satisfied."

Lightning George, though stung to the heart with a fear that all was now over, betrayed no outward disturbance.

"You are a man more impulsive than discreet, it seems to me," he observed, coldly. "But it may be that self-interest has dulled your usual discernment. Since you

first appealed to the lady, I beg leave to refer you to her."

"It must go on," declared Vera, resuming her place at Lightning George's side. "You were too precipitate, sir."

Notwithstanding this reproof, Dan Dirk insisted:

"Say that you love him!"

And then came a sudden burst of uproar—the crack and rattle of firearms, the yells of combatants springing a surprise upon their enemies; and in an instant the glade was filled with charging horsemen.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A BRUTAL CONQUEST.

"LET us go over the ground a little more systematically," said Lightning George, now with nothing of the ardor of a lover, but rather with the stern deliberation of one reading an indictment—his face set, his eyes on the ground.

Awaiting some new development—what, she could not surmise; but something which her prophetic soul told her was more terrible than anything that had gone before—Vera shrunk within herself, growing as cold and still as death.

"To your father I owed a debt of gratitude—for my rearing, my education, my start in life."

"And will you not spare me, for the sake of that memory?" suddenly burst in Vera, with a feeling that all hold upon him was slipping away.

"Wait!" he admonished, coldly. "That debt I have striven to repay, by screening his memory from reproach."

"We will bless you for that!"

"Your mother—"

"Oh, can you speak of her? Do you recall the kindness you have received at her hands? The home—"

"Your mother had a like claim upon me. That I have canceled—"

"Canceled? Oh, George!"

"That claim I have canceled by saving her from the gallows."

"But she is innocent! How can you claim to have canceled a debt of love by what would be due to the veriest stranger? But to what does this tend? Do you meditate deserting us? Being quit of all obligation—"

"Not so fast. One thing at a time, if you please."

"Well, then," with a sob, "you have saved an innocent woman from the gallows!"

"An innocent woman!" said Lightning George, bowing his head repeatedly, with his eyes on the ground—a gesture of meditation.

"What? What?" cried Vera, starting in amazement. "Can you doubt it? Oh! not that! not that! You cannot strike my mother, in revenge for my offense? Oh, this is too cruel—too monstrous! Has not she suffered enough already—"

"An innocent woman," persisted Lightning George, steadily. "Thus far I have stood with you. I, who have not stopped at falsifying accounts, to screen your father—at the bribing of the guardians of justice, to save you mother—and all this for your sake;—I did not hesitate to profess the same faith you entertained in the innocence of the woman accused of your father's death. It seemed to be my only chance of winning you."

"This course of dissimulation having failed, I shall now state the truth."

He lifted his eyes to her face, with the cold resolve not to spare her further.

"And the truth?" she demanded, defying him.

"I know that of the relationship existing between your parents of which you have been sedulously kept in the dark. The discovery was accidental on my part. I never dreamed it till a week before the catastrophe. Even then I did not realize its fatal gravity. Like you, I could not believe one with whom I had been seemingly familiar for years capable of anything flagrantly at variance with the opinion I had formed of her."

"Ah! what is this you are telling me? I will not listen to you!"

"Yes, you will."

"Never! Listen to hear my sacred mother maligned? I should be unworthy of the name of daughter, were I capable of such disloyalty!"

And she turned away, as if to leave him.

"Notwithstanding," he persisted, coolly, "you will remain."

Something in the confidence of his tone restrained her. What would he do, if she did not? It was this unspoken menace that caused her to look back over her shoulder.

"Because," he said, "you would prefer to listen to it here, rather than have me follow you into the presence of your mother, and state it in full before her. It lies with you whether we continue to profess to believe in her innocence to her face. If the mask is allowed to drop, you can imagine her subsequent existence with us."

"And you will do this wicked thing? To wound me, you will crush my mother with the pretense that, in your mind, her innocence is doubtful?"

He looked at her grimly, and filled out what her thought had not quite completed.

"She has regarded me as a son almost as long as she has known you as a daughter. If she now sees that the evidence of her innocence is not sufficient in my case, will not she soon question in her own mind whether it is really sufficient for you? Will not she say to herself that it is through filial loyalty alone that you stand by her in outward profession of belief? A guilty conscience—"

"Ah! ah! You shall not!"

"You will listen here?—or there?"

"Do your worst! I am nothing; but spare my mother!"

And she bowed in submission.

"One week—to be exact, eight days—before the tragedy, I surprised your parents at variance with each other. It was then that I had my first intimation of the state of things in your father's business. He had ruined himself; and your mother knew it."

"Impossible! She was struck with amazement when she learned the fact from you."

"Seemingly. Nevertheless she was aware of it before I so much as suspected it. More than this, she knew the cause."

"It was through unfortunate speculation."

"That was the statement made to you. That was, indeed, the immediate cause. But your father had been a rich man. Why was it he was so crippled that he could not stand the loss he sustained?"

"I know nothing of his business."

"Fortunately for your peace of mind."

"My father, too!—the memory of my dead father? Oh, this is too much!"

And again she turned to fly.

"Here, or there!"

The remorseless alternative arrested her.

"Go on! go on!" she said, brokenly.

"If I must endure this thing, my soul repudiates it!"

"As usual, there was a woman in the case."

"Ah!"—as if stung.

"Your mother knew that too. It is not harder for you to bear than for her."

"Oh, heavens! Papa! papa!"

"That was the drain that sapped your father's fortune to the foundation. He was a man of irreproachable fame. But like so many men of that description, he lived a double life. A youthful infatuation with a woman whom he could not introduce to respectable society, was the secret curse of his life. This began before his marriage to your mother."

A low, quivering moan was the only response to this announcement.

"That marriage was a step of desperation, an effort to free himself from the fatal entanglement. It was not successful. The fault lay with himself. He was never able to escape the glamour the siren cast over him."

"The trouble was, the woman for whom he went to destruction never loved him. She played him, as the expression is, for what he was worth. But she understood her art; and she held him as a serpent holds a bird by fascination. To the day of his death, he loved, and only her, truly."

"No! no! no! That is a lie—a worse than malignant lie—an absurd one! Have I not been witness to the love my father bore my mother all my life?"

"Did it ever occur to you that his solicitude was exaggerated? It certainly was greater than is usual, even from an affectionate husband. Suppose it was remorseful?"

"Ah! I will not listen to you!"

"Yes, you will. After this, you cannot get away till you have heard the whole truth. If I were to let you go now, sooner or later you would come to me of your own accord. Listen!"

"The siren let her victim see that he had a rival—a rival who was willing to purchase favor with unstinted lavishness of wealth. She pretended that she was indifferent to this; but her victim knew that luxury, display, all the thousand gratifications of vanity, were the breath of her existence. What jealous lover would believe that such a woman might not ultimately be brought over? He strove to leave no want unsupplied, so that the wealth of his rival would be no temptation."

"That drove him to desperate speculation, and ultimately, when the crisis came, to methods of which the law takes unfavorable cognizance."

"In a moment of desperation, when ruin stared him in the face, he had the fatuity to confess this to your mother, and throw himself on her mercy. You recall the illness of the day to which I have referred?"

Vera covered her face with her hands. Her mother had, on that day, sustained a shock of some sort. She had been told that it was a menace of apoplexy. It had never occurred to her to seek its cause in any unhappiness.

"I think that her love for you was what decided your mother's acceptance of the situation. She insisted upon an immediate and absolute severance of relations with this woman, which your father promised. Her next stipulation was a removal from the Pacific seaboard to the Atlantic. She would be content with nothing short of the intervention of the Continent."

"Your father pleaded the impossibility of carrying this into immediate effect. His business entanglements would have to be straightened out. The woman would have to be bought off."

"Your mother had an interview with her, and learned that this last plea was disingenuous. She was willing to give her victim his release at a moment's notice. Indeed, she insisted, she was rather tired of him. He had made all sorts of difficulties, of late, about money. She was oppressed with debts, and bled by duns, from all of which his rival was only too eager to free her. She had waited, purely out of good nature; but, with no immediate prospect of a chance for the better, she was beginning to feel that there was an end to all things—especially to needless self-sacrifice. She was gay at the prospect of her release. She gave him to his legal wife as a free boon, if she would only make off with him. In short, she had her revenge for the difference in their social positions."

"After all that, your mother found your father at the feet of the siren, pleading for a respite. She repudiated him with a gay shrug; and that prostrated him, as the accumulated perplexities he had gathered about him had failed to do."

"From first to last your mother urged the necessity of hiding the miserable truth from you. Your life, she said, should not be poisoned with it, no matter what it cost them all. But she saw that he had not the firmness of purpose to try to retrieve the past in the only way possible. In this situation, he lay helpless under her hand."

"Knowing all this, hidden from the world save a few who have no disposition to enlist themselves among your mother's persecutors, what am I to conclude as to her guilt or innocence? On the one side—"

"In spite of all, there is but one verdict. She is innocent!"

"I have a proposal to make. Let us submit this matter to her, and see if she deny it."

"What! what! Do you think me such a monster?"

"Do you fear the test?"

"The test! The test of my mother! What kind of a heart have you?"

"It is all a matter of feeling then? But, feeling cannot do away with facts."

"Be it so. Let what you claim stand. It has no relation whatever to me. It cannot change my love for my mother, nor my belief in her."

"Very well. I renew my suit. Will you be my wife?"

The girl stared at him.

"What is it you have been doing?" she asked, after a pause to grasp his motives.

"Presenting an alternative to you. Marry me, and I am silent. Refuse—"

"And you will tell my mother that you have—"

"Stripped the vail from the secret she has so desperately striven to keep from you."

"Monster!"

"Lover!"

"Ah! you desecrate the name!"

"I faithfully illustrate the reality. I love you; I would destroy the world, if it lay in my path, to attain you! Judge whether I shall be your slave, if you bless me."

"I want no slaves! It were a strange requital, that I should bless you in the same act by which you curse me."

"Strange or otherwise, do you yield compliance?"

"And you will really do this thing?"

"As my soul liveth!"

He took off his hat and lifted his face toward heaven, as in registering an oath.

The girl stood dumb, her face whitening, her eyes dilating, her frame rigid, yet with a fine quiver running all through it.

How could she decide, in that fearful strait?

So much depended upon it for him, that he feared to let her take a stand till he had added the last possible weight in his side of the balance; so that, when she seemed about to speak at last, he lifted his hand in arrest.

"Wait! Come with me. I have something of interest to show you."

Mechanically she followed him, to where they came upon Nivins, bound and under guard.

"Do you recognize him?" asked Lightning George.

The girl replied with a shudder of repulsion.

Nothing further was necessary there. Returning toward the lean-to, Lightning George awaited her decision in silence.

It came at last, in a voice so husky that the words were scarcely articulate.

"You shall not destroy my mother, whatever you may do to me!"

He could scarcely restrain an impulse to leap into the air with a yell of exultant triumph.

However, the struggle gave him a greater outward coldness than before.

"It must be at once."

"At once?" with a start.

"I can afford to run no risks. I have a minister in readiness, awaiting only your consent."

She looked at him with the strangest expression he had ever seen in a woman's eyes.

"Come!" she said, extending her hand.

For amazement, he could not take it at once.

"If we are to be married," she said, "we must go to my mother as lovers. You are strangely forgetful."

Then, as lover never took the hand of his bride before, he took the hand she offered; and together they sought Mrs. Stanard.

"Mother," said the girl, "we are assured of your consent; but we crave your blessing as well, and your wishes for our future happiness. It does not take you by surprise, does it, mother?"

Lightning George had removed his hat. He knelt at the feet of the woman who looked upon him as a mother does upon one to whose care and keeping she is gladly resigning all that is most dear to her.

"Mother!" he said, kneeling, and bowing his head.

"My son!" she murmured, placing her hands upon it—"now my son indeed!"

She extended her arms to her daughter, in congratulation and the wish for all good things.

Vera sunk into them, and—fainted dead away!

Then came the sounds of the irruption of a body of horsemen.

Lightning George sprang up, and with only an assurance that all was safe, hastened from the lean-to, to find himself face to face with Dan Dirk, who greeted him with a smile of triumph.

"Ah, my dear sir, I have you now! You seem to have forgotten that the men who

were your support belong to me; and that, now our contract is fulfilled, they no longer owe you allegiance."

And this Lightning George heard without changing color.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DESPERATE WOMAN'S WAY.

JULIA WINTERS had not been idle. Failing to swerve Dan Dirk from his pledge, yet believing that he would jump at any advantage that came to him without compromising his honor, she turned to the one other means that seemed to remain to her.

At the hazard of her life she succeeded in effecting the release of Max Rankin and the stage-driver; and aided them to turn the tables on their guard.

This she was able to do, from the fact that, to avoid an encounter between Vera and Rankin, Lightning George had placed him and Tony apart from the main body of his men.

As they made prisoners of their guard, there was no one to report their escape; so Lightning George had no warning of this new menace.

To them Julia revealed the trap which Lightning George had laid for Dan Dirk; and it was her suggestion that the only hope lay in rousing the citizens of Murderer's Row, and fetching them to the rescue of their King.

Tony Dobson fell in with this plan at once; but it would have been too late, had not they met Brad Turner and his army out on the trail of his prisoner and the man who had so boldly effected his release.

As before, Tony's authority made itself felt over the denizens of Murderer's Row; and so well planned and executed was the invasion of the chaparral in which Lightning George had quartered himself, that the surprising party cut in between Lightning George and his men almost before a blow could be struck.

Deprived of their leader, the men were scattered in confusion in every direction; and, leaving the finish to Brad Turner, Max Rankin and Dobson, with a squad of picked men at their backs, leaped down so as to invest the wedding party, holding the now dismayed bridegroom under the magical drop.

Dan Dirk recognized these men, and realized that he was again master of the situation. Once more he was the King of No Man's Land!

He did not greet them. He manifested no outward exultation. He stuck to the business in hand as if nothing unusual were occurring.

"Say," he repeated, "that you love him!"

Max Rankin heard that charge, and with a throb of anguish realized what was going on.

In the very words of Dan Dirk, but with an intonation that filled the girl's soul with a delirium of bliss, torn and shredded with a frenzy of despair unutterable, as she saw his love on one hand and her mother's destruction on the other, he reiterated:

"Say that you love him!"

Her very breath was bated while her eyes rested on Max's challenging face.

Then she tore them away, and throwing up her arms, whirled half around, and fell upon her mother's bosom, with a cry of piteous, remorseful pleading.

"Now, sir!" cried Dan Dirk, his whole soul in arms, "there is but one thing left. You refused to fight me when you were master. Now that I am master, I accord you that privilege."

The game was up. Lightning George had nothing more to hope for. His plot had fallen in ruins about him. A word would show Vera that all he had told her to the detriment of her parents was the basest of fabrications.

Her father's life had been as clean a page as ever held a human record. Her mother was all that she had seemed to those who loved and revered her most. Between these two, constant from the altar to the grave, there had never been a word or thought at variance.

"I never meant to refuse you after the accomplishment of my purpose," declared Lightning George, coolly. "While it was pending, it did not suit me to take you up, though you said to me what no man can

say, and the world continue to hold both of us. A word to these friends of mine, and I shall be at your service."

He turned to where Mrs. Stanard was clinging to her child, and facing Max Rankin with defiance.

"Mother!" he said—"permit me the use of the name for this last time—I have played my game to the finish and have lost. I bear no malice. I am willing to make such reparation as I can. The object for which I have striven is now hopelessly beyond my reach. That being so, I have no further object in refraining from soothing the rest of your life path. I owe you nothing but kindness. I feel kindly toward you. You have had no part in my defeat. From first to last you have stood by me."

"I now take upon myself all the opprobrium I have heaped upon your husband, my benefactor. His only fault was his over-indulgence of me, through the love he bore my father. It was my reckless speculation, and finally my fraud, that brought him to ruin. Even then, when he discovered all, he would have continued to screen me. But he would have stood in the way of my aspirations to his daughter's hand in marriage. For this reason I resolved to remove him from my path. His death was by my procurement. The hand that administered the fatal draught did it at my behest. This gentleman,"—pointing to Rankin the detective—"if he has not already succeeded, can easily probe the matter, now that he has the cue. It was I who turned suspicion upon you. Not that I would have wounded you wantonly; but you were a means to the accomplishment of my purpose. With you in my power, my debtor for your life and liberty, I hoped to use you as a fulcrum from which to move your daughter to my will. Rankin told you all this truthfully. Your daughter, if she will, can tell you the last card I played with her. It was a trump! It won the game! However, she may conclude to spare you. Miss Vera, pray forget my little fiction. I wish you a happier fate than that I had prepared for you."

"And now," he concluded, turning to Dan Dirk, "I am yours!"

There was no higgling over the terms of the meeting. They simply withdrew from the sight of the ladies, and stood at twelve paces, while Tony Dobson gave the signal.

There was a nearly simultaneous flash of their revolvers, anticipated by the space of a second, by a report coming nobody knew whence at the moment.

Dan Dirk gasped, staggered a step forward, whirled half-round, and fell like a log on his back.

Lightning George stood apparently unharmed.

Then up went a yell of rage from the men of Murderer's Row. There was no magnanimity nor justice to be looked for from them. An outsider had shot their King! They were for tearing him limb from limb!

Then came a voice in frantic appeal.

"Georgel! Georgel! Oh, Georgel!"

It was a woman's voice beyond all question, though out of the bushes whence it came there burst a seeming young man, riding a powerful black horse, and leading another of equal excellence.

A bound, and Julia Winters was beside the man whom she had opposed so desperately, for whom she was risking her life with equal recklessness!

"Up! up!" she cried. "They will lynch you!"

Lightning George saw that this was true. He was in the saddle before the words were out of her mouth. Then the two swept out of the chaparral and away, distancing all pursuit.

It was found that Dan Dirk's weapon was disabled. The cock and the cap-nipple had been shot away. This, while it exploded the weapon, had deflected its aim far enough to send the bullet wide of its mark.

"It was a service of Lightning George's pupil to her master," said Dan Dirk, with a faint smile, when he had recovered sufficiently to examine the weapon.

His last words to Vera, as she bent over him, more in sorrow than in resentment, were:

"In your happiness, try to think of me as leniently as you can, not forgetting this—I

loved you, and that love set me at war with myself."

Tony Dobson was a proud, though a very much embarrassed man, when she held his hand and said:

"You kept your pledge to me, dear friend. I shall never forget what I owe you."

At the behest of their King, the men of Murderer's Row showered every attention on their now distinguished guests, who, however, could not be induced to revisit their town. Tom Curtin alone kept discreetly out of sight.

Hope, and the sight of her daughter's happiness, lent Mrs. Stanard renewed life; and under the devoted ministrations of Max Rankin, she resumed her journey, not toward the scene of her misfortune, but toward the Atlantic seaboard, *en route* for Europe.

It was not easy for her to transfer to Max the feelings she had lavished upon the unworthy Lightning George; but, gradually, Vera, by her evident infatuation with her husband, taught her even that.

Under the influence of the wealth which he owed to his wife, Max developed into a gentleman of marked distinction—a scholar and a power among the minds that shape the destinies of the world; so that he was equally an object of pride and affection to Vera.

And this was the upshot of blocking Lightning George's game.

THE END.

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